

GUIDES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

This guide (and others in the series) is an initiative of the Office of the Bishop and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. It is intended to help church members consider how they might respond to contemporary ethical issues. It is meant for use in personal reflection and is not an 'official' statement of the church on the topic. I am grateful to Nick Schwarz, Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, for his ongoing work on this project, and to others who assisted.

Bishop Paul Smith
Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand
1 July 2022

VAPING (E-CIGARETTES)

Learn about the matter at hand

How the decline of cigarette smoking led to the rise of vaping

During the last few decades of the 20th century, medical scientists and doctors began to recognise and warn about the hazards of tobacco smoking: lung cancer and other types of cancer, lung diseases, heart disease, stroke, peripheral vascular disease, type 2 diabetes, pregnancy complications, osteoporosis and so on.

Governments in many countries realised that many premature deaths and costly chronic illnesses could be avoided by reducing smoking. They adopted measures to discourage smoking, such as better health education, restrictions on cigarette advertising, compulsory health warnings on cigarette packs, restrictions on indoor smoking and high cigarette taxes. They also encouraged smokers to quit via advertising and doctor-supervised programs involving nicotine patches, nicotine chewing gum and other medications to aid quitting. Over time these measures worked, and the proportion of people who smoked declined.

Another product developed and marketed as a strategy for helping smokers quit was the electronic cigarette or 'e-cigarette'. E-cigarettes were designed to deliver nicotine like a conventional cigarette, minus the tobacco smoke.

E-cigarettes are now commonly referred to as 'vapes'. Although e-cigarettes were initially designed as aids to stopping smoking, their manufacturers saw and seized the opportunity – before laws could be introduced to stop them – to market them to a whole new generation of young people who never previously smoked.

Vape manufacturers used the same tactics that tobacco companies and producers of alcoholic fizzy drinks used to market their products to teenagers and young adults, for example, paying celebrity influencers to

endorse their products, presenting their products as cool, glamorous, fun, 'clean' and liberating, flavouring their products with sweet, fruity flavours, and packaging them colourfully and attractively.

While some vape styles are designed to appeal to smokers – they look like conventional cigarettes, cigars or pipes – many are designed to appeal to teens, disguised to look like pens, highlighters, USB sticks and make-up to evade detection by parents and teachers.

What is vaping?

Vaping is the act of smoking e-cigarettes. Vaping is, of course, a variation of the word 'vapour'. It is a clever but misleading name because it gives vapers the impression that they are inhaling water vapour. Water may indeed be present in the vaping liquid; however, testing has shown that vaping liquids contain a huge variety of chemicals, including nicotine, food additives and flavours (which may be safe to eat but not safe to inhale), heavy metals and other chemicals known to cause lung damage or cancer.¹ Labelling of store-bought vaping liquids has been found to be unreliable. Contents of 'home brews' are potentially even more unreliable.

How do vapes work?

Vapes contain a battery-powered atomiser or vaporiser and a cartridge or 'tank' of liquid or 'juice', typically containing nicotine, artificial flavourings and other chemicals. When the vaper inhales through the mouthpiece or presses a button, the atomiser heats and vaporises the liquid, and the vapour is drawn into the person's lungs.

Why do people vape?

People vape for different reasons. We list some below. Some are from smokers. Some are from young people who have never smoked. Some are common to both groups.

- I vape to help me stop smoking and overcome my addiction to nicotine.
- I vape to reduce the costs and adverse health effects associated with smoking.
- I vape to avoid the horrible symptoms of nicotine withdrawal.
- I vape to self-medicate, lift or stabilise my mood, induce positive emotions or relieve negative feelings, such as boredom, stress, anxiety, failure, or unhappiness.
- I vape because of peer pressure: to fit in with or impress my peers or project a certain image (for example, coolness, nonchalance, rebelliousness, sophistication).
- I vape because I like the flavours and want to try all the ones that appeal to me.

Laws regarding vapes and vaping

Laws regarding vaping differ around the world. Generally speaking, however, the trend is towards stronger regulation. Fewer countries are treating vaping as a 'less harmful alternative to smoking', and more are acting to restrict access to vapes due to concerns about a rapid rise in young people vaping and the possible impact over time on their health.

In Australia, new vaping laws came into effect in October 2021. The law now states that nicotine-containing vapes can only be bought legally by adults with a doctor's prescription, stating that the vapes are to help

¹ In the US, during 2019 and 2020, over 2800 young people were admitted to hospital with acute respiratory failure due to severe lung inflammation caused by vaping liquids containing THC (the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana) and an oil called vitamin E acetate. Sixty-eight of them died.

the buyer stop smoking.² Vapes that do not contain nicotine do not require a prescription but can only be sold in shops with the required licence and bought by customers aged 18 and over – except in WA, where the law is even tighter, and vapes without nicotine are banned.

The penalties for violating Australia's vaping laws are severe, but many people selling and buying illegally take the risk that they won't get caught. Many illegally imported vapes are inaccurately labelled, so users cannot be sure what they are inhaling. Testing of illegally obtained vapes shows that nicotine is present in almost all vaping liquids, even if labelled nicotine-free.

The Australian Government is aware there is a thriving black market of vapes and that many young people are trying vaping and becoming addicted. As well as committing to cracking down on illegal sales of vapes, the government is also considering other measures like higher taxes on vapes, plain packaging, compulsory health warnings and bans on flavours designed to appeal to children.

Some different perspectives on vaping

a) Libertarian perspectives

Libertarians place high importance on freedom. They have argued for widespread freedom to vape legally. They argue, for example:

- Individuals own their bodies, not governments, so governments shouldn't unduly interfere with individuals' decisions about what they do with their bodies.
- If vaping is less harmful than smoking, vaping should be less regulated than smoking.

Some doctors who advocate for a 'harm-reduction approach' to vaping support the libertarians. They acknowledge that vaping isn't harmless but say it is much less harmful than smoking.

b) Public health perspectives

Public health advocates place high importance on health, especially at the population level. They offer the following arguments for restricting people's freedom to vape:

- Vaping doesn't just affect the health of vapers; it affects others in the community as well, for example, non-vapers who involuntarily inhale vape smoke, children who inadvertently poison themselves by consuming vaping liquid, and taxpayers who share the costs of treating vaping-related disease and nicotine addiction.
- Prevention is better than cure. It is better to tightly restrict vaping than take on the task of treating its effects, which could potentially be huge.
- Just as public health advocates' efforts to reduce the harms and costs of smoking were paying off, vaping threatens to replace smoking as a major public health burden.

² The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners' (RACGP) *Guidelines on pharmacotherapy for smoking cessation* caution doctors against prescribing vapes before trying other smoking cessation strategies first, such as nicotine patches or chewing gum. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (the government body that evaluates, monitors and regulates medicines and medical devices) warns that, to date, it has not formally approved any vaping products and cannot confirm their safety, efficacy or quality.

Pros and cons of vaping

To summarise this section on learning about vaping, table 1 below lists the pros (positive sides) and cons (negative sides).

Table 1: Pros and cons of vaping

Pros	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inhaling nicotine via a vaping liquid activates the brain's reward centre in the same way as nicotine inhaled in tobacco smoke. The vaper experiences temporary positive feelings, such as a 'high', 'buzz', 'sense of calm' or 'pleasant distraction from life's problems'. 2. Vaping probably does less harm to human bodies than smoking. 3. Switching to vaping might help smokers quit smoking – but they will then face the equally difficult challenge of quitting vaping. 4. Vaping might be said to be cheaper than smoking – but if you are vaping a nicotine-containing liquid without a doctor's prescription (which you are required by law to have) and are caught and fined, you will be even worse off financially.
Cons	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inhaling nicotine might enhance mood or alleviate stress, but the sense of wellbeing is temporary and illusory – the underlying cause of the low mood or stress is unchanged. 2. Non-smokers who take up vaping will likely find it hard to stop. Their habit over time will be expensive and harmful to their health. 3. Emotional maturation, ie the process of learning how to deal constructively with difficult emotions, can be disrupted when children, teens and young adults use nicotine and other drugs as mood enhancers or stabilisers. 4. Vapers in Australia risk heavy fines if they are caught vaping nicotine-containing liquids without a doctor's prescription confirming that their vape is an aid to stopping smoking. 5. Most illegally imported vaping liquids that are labelled nicotine-free actually contain nicotine. 6. Vaping nicotine-containing vaping liquid tends to perpetuate nicotine addiction in smokers and create addiction in non-smokers. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Nicotine in high enough doses acts as a poison. Prior to World War II, it was extensively used as an agricultural insecticide. b. Nicotine is as addictive as cocaine and heroin and produces similar cravings and withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, difficulty concentrating, irritability and restlessness. c. Side effects of vaping caused by nicotine include nausea, mouth and airway irritation and palpitations. 7. Nicotine itself – independent of the other toxins in tobacco smoke: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. adversely affects the heart, lungs, brain, reproductive organs, kidneys, skin and many other parts of the body b. causes high blood pressure and increases the risk of many types of cancer c. suppresses the immune system and delays healing after injury d. is especially harmful to teenagers' brains, impairing their ability to focus, concentrate, remember, and learn new things. 8. Vaping liquids that don't contain nicotine contain many other chemicals that harm the lungs and other body tissues. 9. Vaping can be a 'gateway' for non-smokers to start smoking tobacco or experimenting with other drugs. 10. Small children can accidentally poison themselves with nicotine if older vapers leave their vapes or vaping liquid containers lying around.

You can judge for yourselves whether the pros or cons have a stronger case.

A Christian perspective on vaping

As Christians, when we think about the ethics of a particular product or behaviour, we first look to God for answers. The clearest and most reliable source of God's will for us is the Bible.

But can the Bible really offer us worthwhile guidance on vaping? After all, vaping didn't exist in biblical times!

Yes, the Bible can help us on the topic of vaping. Read on.

1. God wants his people to be law-abiding.

God's word says we are to respect our governing authorities and the laws they impose on us (Romans 13:1–5). Vaping is illegal for most citizens in Australia, including everyone under 18 years old. The only laws Christians can rightly refuse to obey are laws that require us to disobey God's commands. But nowhere does God command us to vape, so that exception doesn't apply.

2. God wants his people to respect and care for the bodies he gave us so we can better serve him.

God made us and loves us, he saves us through faith in his Son Jesus, and he desires our love and respect (Genesis 1:27; Exodus 20:3; Psalm 139:14; John 3:16). We can show our love and respect for God and serve God better by being careful about what we do with our bodies (Romans 12:1,2; 1 Corinthians 6:20; Ephesians 2:10). If trustworthy sources like medical scientists and doctors tell us that vaping harms our brains, lungs, hearts and other organs, we do well to stop vaping or not to start at all.

3. God wants his people to be wary of things with high potential to capture and enslave them.

We know that nicotine is highly addictive and that some of us are more vulnerable to addiction than others. Those of us who become addicted to a substance, product or pastime (for example, nicotine, alcohol, other drugs, pornography, gambling, bodily perfection, or social media) discover that these things possess the power to take over our lives. Our cravings for these things can be so strong that they interfere with our ability to focus on our studies, work or relationship with God and make us irritable, secretive, deceptive and even abusive in our relationships with family and friends. Jesus said that God's two greatest commandments are to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40). If we know that a substance, product, or pastime is harmful and highly addictive, and it typically harms our relationship with God and people who love and care for us, we do well to not engage with it at all.

4. God wants people who are addicted to acknowledge their addiction, repent of it, and seek help.

Not everybody who starts vaping gets addicted to nicotine. Some people vape only when others are vaping too in social settings and feel no desire to vape at home or when alone. We can call them habitual vapers. They are not addicted. But for people who feel a need to vape soon after waking up in the morning and when they are alone, who get anxious or irritable and experience physical symptoms of nicotine withdrawal if they can't vape, then we could rightly call them dependent or addicted vapers.

If that sounds like you or someone you know, it is best for you or your friend to acknowledge that you have a problem, recognise that your behaviour is wrong, and get help to overcome it. A pastor can help you through private confession and forgiveness and will not reveal what you say to anyone else.

For those who use vaping to self-medicate as a strategy for coping with life's difficulties, God knows that life can be hard. Do not fool yourself that your problems justify your self-harming. Recognise the price you are paying for your illusory escape from your problems. God does not condemn you for your addiction. He wants to free you. Seek help for the issues that burden you and for overcoming your addiction. Pray to God

for strength and guidance and seek the counsel of people with relevant skills and experience, especially people with a strong Christian faith.

In Box 1 below, we consider the objection, 'But if Jesus was okay with wine, wouldn't he be okay with other "feel-good substances" like nicotine'?

But if Jesus was okay with wine, wouldn't he be okay with other 'feel-good substances' like nicotine?

First, let's address the claim that Jesus was okay with wine.

It is true that Jesus drank wine. Jesus even turned a large amount of water into wine for a wedding celebration when the hosts ran out. That wine was said to be of the finest quality, so Jesus must have known a thing or two about good wine.

In Jesus' day, wine was also used to relieve pain, dress wounds and for other medical uses. It is very likely it was also drunk when no water was available, or it was contaminated. We can be pretty sure Jesus would have been happy to endorse the responsible use of wine in those circumstances.

It does not follow, however, that Jesus would have approved of the abuse of wine, of drinking in excess in order to get drunk. Jesus respected himself and other people. He respected the Scriptures that spoke against drunkenness. He knew drinking too much wine impaired drinkers' judgement and made them impulsive, foolish, vulgar, quick-tempered, and prone to violence.

Now let's address the question of Jesus' stance on other feel-good substances like nicotine.

We can't know for sure what Jesus' stance was on such substances because we don't have any documents stating his views. In Jesus' time, in various parts of the world, people had discovered medicinal and psychoactive plants, some of which produced desirable mind-altering effects, such as a sense of wellbeing (or euphoria), heightened alertness and confidence, relaxation and relief of pain and hunger and fatigue. Their descendants today still use many of these plants in the same way their ancestors did, for example, coca, opium poppies, tobacco, khat, betelnut and kava.

Given that Jesus accepted the responsible use of alcohol, including for consumption on special occasions and for pain relief and wound dressing, he might also be okay with traditional peoples responsibly consuming their traditional substances on special occasions and, in the absence of safer and more effective modern medicines, using them as therapeutics.

We should not jump to the conclusion, however, that Jesus would be okay with anyone using those traditional substances irresponsibly, for example, by:

- disrespecting them by using them for trivial purposes rather than for special occasions
- deliberately intoxicating themselves
- self-medicating with them to temporarily 'escape' from problems that should be addressed in healthier ways
- making false claims about their benefits and hiding, denying or trivialising their risks
- selectively breeding more and more potent (and dangerous) varieties
- mass producing them, marketing them to vulnerable people and profiting from their addiction.

Make a decision and act on it

If you are under 18, it is illegal for you to vape. Don't fool yourself that you have a choice. Please respect and obey the law. Understand that the vaping industry uses unethical tactics to addict and exploit people like you.

If you are 18 or over, you can only legally access nicotine-containing vapes in Australia if you have a doctor's prescription saying the vapes are to help you stop smoking. You should know that the effectiveness of vapes as a smoking cessation tool is still disputed. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners' advice to doctors is that other strategies to quit smoking should be tried before vaping.

If you are 18 or over and are considering using nicotine-free vapes, remember that vapes on sale in Australia are frequently mislabelled. The majority of vapes labelled as nicotine-free actually contain nicotine. Vape manufacturers and sellers want to deceive you into getting addicted so that you keep buying their products.

If you are already a regular vaper and are finding it hard to stop, see 'How to Quit Vaping' for help at <https://teen.smokefree.gov/quit-vaping/how-to-quit-vaping>

Further reading and viewing

Information about vaping

- ABC News, 'Vaping exposes inhalers to more than 200 chemicals', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAeXmCYdwfs&t=322s>
- Queensland Health, 'What's really in vape juice?', <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/news-events/news/whats-really-in-vape-juice>
- ABC Health, 'Vaping is becoming more and more prevalent among kids. Here's what parents should know', <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2022-12-05/vaping-what-parents-need-to-know-how-to-help-kids/101725162>
- 'Mythbusting: e-cigarettes', https://d1pz9rwztkrv8y.cloudfront.net/media/documents/Quit_Infographic_Myths_for_Teens_2021.pdf
- 'The Dangers of Teen Vaping: for young people', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5PRVUDAJBM&t=523s>

Australian Government statement on e-cigarettes

- National Health and Medical Research Council 2022 Statement on Electronic Cigarettes, <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/all-topics/electronic-cigarettes/ceo-statement>

Video documentary

- ABC Four Corners, 'The thriving black market of vaping', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMbXUE9Hjwg>

Help to quit

- Become a Smokefree Teen, 'How to Quit Vaping', <https://teen.smokefree.gov/quit-vaping/how-to-quit-vaping>
- Quitline: 137 848