

Flavors make vaping more palatable, help cigarette smokers kick the habit

By: Amelia Howard

(Source: This is the second half of an opinion piece titled: [Pro/Con: As vaping-related illnesses rise, should flavored e-cigarettes be banned? / Opinion](#)

The Philadelphia Enquirer - September 21, 2019)

The myth of vape flavors designed for kids is believable because it is intuitive. It targets natural emotional concern for kids, and exploits the fact that most people know little about vaping or the role of flavors in harm reduction and its central importance to public health. The myth of evil flavors is an appeal to seeming common sense that discourages us from questioning its flawed basis.

Flavored e-cigarettes were not invented by “Big Tobacco,” nor are they an unscrupulous marketing plot from the thousands of small, independently owned vape companies in the United States to addict kids. Non-tobacco vape flavors are a [user innovation](#).

My own research examines the substantial contribution of users to vaping innovation, including the development of a commercial flavor market. From examining thousands of [early e-cigarette forum posts](#), I’ve discovered that fruit, candy, bakery, mint, and beverage flavors were introduced to vaping in 2008 by pioneering users of the technology who were desperate to use e-cigarettes to replace smoking. [Dissatisfied with the taste](#) of products from online Chinese vendors at that time, these [users began experimenting](#) with water-soluble flavorings from specialty flavor houses traditionally used in [confectionary applications](#). The [commercial flavor market emerged to meet the demands of these users](#).

Flavors like [cotton candy, bubble gum](#), and the many other examples opponents claim are obviously targeted to youth are in fact flavors someone trying to quit smoking wanted to vape and [mixed themselves](#). These [innovations in home-mixing](#) resulted in the commercial market about to be banned today.

An [estimated 10.8 million adults](#) in the United States vape and the vast majority (85%) are current or former smokers. The preponderance of evidence indicates that non-tobacco flavors, including fruit, dessert, and candy, are essential to [vaping as an effective](#) way to quit smoking and avoid [relapse](#).

In 2018, the largest flavor preference [survey](#) of adult vapers in the United States found fruit and dessert flavors to be the most popular by far. The same survey found that only a minority of the nearly 70,000 participants used tobacco flavors, and their use decreased over time. These results are consistent with several large-scale [consumer surveys](#) and [peer-reviewed studies](#), where adults who vape overwhelmingly reported that non-tobacco flavors and [flavor variability](#) matter to them and help keep them off tobacco.

Importantly, youth vaping didn't peak at the same time flavor options did. The vape flavor market expanded until 2016, after which the FDA prohibited new products from being introduced without marketing approval. There were an estimated [7,764 flavors](#) available on e-cigarette brand websites in 2013. By 2016 that estimate had more than doubled to [15,586](#). If flavors cause youth to vape, we'd expect youth vaping to have increased steadily with the proliferation of flavors. CDC data show vaping rates among youth increased every year between 2011 (when the behavior was first measured) and 2015. But in 2016, right when the United States vaping market reached "peak flavor," national data showed youth vaping decline for the first time. This low rate remained stable in 2017. Increases in 2018 and 2019 happened when the flavor market was frozen in its 2016 state.

While national surveys of youth do show that youth experiment with flavors, this hardly shows that flavors are the main driver of youth vaping. It more likely reflects what is popular overall.

Given the [morally and politically charged context of the e-cigarette debate](#), and the genuinely concerning news of [lung poisonings believed to be caused by contaminants in illicit THC oil cartridges](#) (and not nicotine vaping products targeted by this ban), it is easy to forget that [tobacco use is endemic](#) among youth, that [teenagers still smoke cigarettes](#), and [5.6 million kids alive under the age of 18 today will ultimately die prematurely as a result of smoking](#).

No youth *should* use nicotine, but the reality is that teenagers experiment with adult things. There is [overwhelming](#) evidence that the adult things they are experimenting with now are [vastly and demonstrably safer than cigarettes](#), which kill nearly 500,000 Americans annually. Allowing vaping to replace smoking at the population level has [enormous benefits for future generations](#).

Flavors reflect the preferences of the people who use these products to stop smoking. E-cigarettes don't work when people don't like them, and flavors are what the people who need e-cigarettes like about them.

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