

# Breaking up with my Juul: why quitting vaping is harder than quitting cigarettes

[theguardian.com/society/2019/oct/10/breaking-up-with-my-juul-why-quitting-vaping-is-harder-than-quitting-cigarettes](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/oct/10/breaking-up-with-my-juul-why-quitting-vaping-is-harder-than-quitting-cigarettes)

Kari Paul

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The electronic cigarette Juul was invented as a means to help its two co-founders quit smoking. But it's surprisingly hard to quit the quitting tool. I found out 27 days ago when I took a final puff of my USB-shaped nicotine vape, which over the past year had become an extension of my arm.

When I first picked up a Juul, it seemed innocent enough: I was out on a Saturday night and I felt itchy for a new vice. At 25, I had made it through most of my life without smoking cigarettes, save for when I was out on the weekends and bumming them from friends.

But Juul seemed cool – the teens are doing it! Models like Gigi Hadid were doing it! It was small and cute! It didn't make you smell bad! It came in yummy flavors like mango and mint and cucumber! So in September 2018, I sauntered into a Brooklyn bodega on Saturday night and purchased a Juul starter kit with the classic black device and four flavors of pods.

Less than one year later, I had slid into new depths of Juul depravity, consuming a pod and a half – more than a pack of cigarettes worth of nicotine – per day and spending at least \$25 a week on pods. I had taken to carrying around an external battery pack lest my Juul die and I be trapped without my fix. On vacation in a city without brand-name Juul pods for sale I wandered for hours in search of a vape store.

In other words, I had unwittingly become the face of what the FDA has called “an epidemic of addiction”, as one of millions of young Americans who became addicted to vaping without having smoked cigarettes.

This year, there have been hundreds reports of users with lung problems from vaping and the CDC encouraged adults to “[refrain] from using e-cigarette, or vaping, products, particularly those containing THC”. A ban on Juul flavors in San Francisco – where I live – made buying pods extremely burdensome, and Donald Trump threatened to ban flavored pods from stores on a federal level.

I knew it was time to quit – but I had no idea how hard it would be.

Nicotine is one of the world’s most addictive chemicals. Even smoking just one cigarette a month induces addiction in more than 30% of users, a 2002 study from Medical School found. Another study found 97% of people who smoked three or more cigarettes became addicted. The number of teens using vapes daily increased by 80% in 2018.

“It’s almost a guaranteed addiction,” Judith Grisel, a former nicotine addict herself and author of Never Enough: the Neuroscience of Addiction, said. “It’s very compelling because the brain adapts to it so quickly, in a way that isn’t true with opiates or alcohol. Some people can drink alcohol without developing a problem, not everyone who takes opiates recreationally has a problem, but pretty much everyone likes the feeling of nicotine.”

Vaping is even more addictive than cigarettes, Grisel said, and Juul is more addictive than other brands of vapes. In 2015, when Juul was introduced to the market, the most popular e-cigarettes had only between 1% and 2.4% nicotine. Juul debuted pods with 5% nicotine.

“The delivery of nicotine in vapes is even quicker than cigarettes, which is hard to do,” Grisel said. “That’s the biggest factor in addictive liability if it’s the same chemical: the speed with which you get the hit.”

Juul says it selected the 5% nicotine concentration in its products in the US “to provide adult smokers with a viable, satisfying alternative to combustible cigarettes”.

The company said it also offers 3% strength products and that far higher nicotine concentrations in products other than Juul were available when the company launched in 2015.

The function of Juul makes it difficult to quit as well. Its discrete puffs of smoke and small size make using it much easier, and quitting it much harder. When I Juuled, I didn’t take smoke breaks – I had grown accustomed to puffing away all day at my desk, and even more on stressful deadlines. I was often Juuling in my pajamas the last thing before bed and the first thing when I woke up. I Juuled on bike rides, on plane bathrooms, and at the office. Once I repeatedly hit my Juul on a kayak as I floated through the rivers of northern California, storing the device in my swimsuit top.

I have heard of varying ways to quit Juul: teens are filming themselves throwing their Juuls out the window and soaking them in water. One person I spoke with successfully used a combination of Wellbutrin – an antidepressant with smoking cessation side-

effects – and nicotine patches to quit. Another friend began filling her own Juul pods with a lower-percentage vape fluid, steadily decreasing it until it was just 1%, and then nicotine-free. Others, ironically, are now using cigarettes to quit the Juul they bought to quit cigarettes.

As for me, I locked my Juul in a timed safe in my room and decided I was done, for good. I set it to close for 72 hours. At the recommendation of many ex-smokers, I read Allen Carr's Easy Way to Stop Smoking – a book written in 1985 about cigarettes, long before the Juul epidemic had been realized. It uses tenets of cognitive behavioral therapy to change the beliefs of the addict until the desire to use nicotine is completely removed. It promises that after three days of pain, you will be free of nicotine cravings. Grisel said this is consistent with the science of quitting.

“The rapidity with which you develop an addiction mirrors the rapidity with which you get over the addiction,” she said. “You quickly get addicted to nicotine and it quickly leaves the system.”

During what may have been the worst 72 hours of my life, the idea that nicotine withdrawal would simply dissipate if I could refrain from hitting the stupid metal vape that got me here was incomprehensible.

I scheduled my quitting days for the weekend so I could retreat into withdrawal in peace, but it was hellish. I biked manically, I cried publicly, I grew irritated at nearly every sound I heard. But on day four I woke up with a realization: I no longer wanted nicotine.

# I'm into health food and hot yoga. I'm also addicted to vaping

[theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/21/vaping-juul-addiction-quitting](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/21/vaping-juul-addiction-quitting)

Liz Presson

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I like to think of myself as a healthy, calm lady-boss who aims to inspire others. My morning routine consists of transcendental meditation, light therapy and boxing before 8am. When I'm not in front of my computer or traveling for a public speaking gig, I'm usually in a hot yoga class. And so it may surprise my clients, family, and friends that I am one of the 50 million people around the globe addicted to e-cigarette juice.

If you've ever heard the phrase "Juuling", you probably picture a teenager who rips a Juul that's hidden in the sleeve of their hoodie, holding in the hit so as not to get caught vaping in math class, not a middle-class woman in her early 30s who gets HydraFacials and sips turmeric tea.

Nancy Jo Sales

The juice, better known as e-liquid, in a vape or e-cigarette usually contains nicotine and other ingredients like propylene glycol, and vegetable glycerin, which is heated to create an inhalable aerosol. Juul is the most popular vaping product. Using influencer marketing and with celebrity endorsements like Dave Chappelle hitting his Juul during his 2017 Netflix special, Sophie Turner proclaiming having her Juul taken away was the secret to acting, and an Instagrammable photo of Katy Perry sporting her Juul at the Golden Globes, the company went from selling an unknown product to owning the category and from \$200m in sales in 2017 to \$1.3bn the following year. According to a Jama study, more than one in four students (28% of high schoolers) vape nicotine. Dr Karen Wilson of the American Academy of Pediatrics said that she sees "kids that are using four pods" – the nicotine equivalent of four packs of cigarettes – a day. Adults who vape often use it as a smoking cessation tool. And some adults have entered vape culture, mixing and selling custom flavors and labeling themselves as do-it-yourselfers, cloud chasers, sub-ohmers, coil builders or modders. When it comes to culture I appreciate, I'm more of a literature or health food aficionado. I've never discussed my mod or coil on Reddit, nor do I know how to blow a vape cloud in the shape of a jellyfish.

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Yet, like the teenager we envision being naively pressured into the habit, three years ago I adopted the common belief that e-cigarettes are less harmful than other forms of tobacco. Like many, I was surprised when the number of people with a severe lung illness linked to vaping had reached over 2,600 cases and nearly 60 deaths. Recently, we've learned that the key culprit behind those illnesses is probably black market THC

vapes using specific additives including a form of vitamin E. Even so, the FDA and Trump administration are pushing for a national ban on most e-cigarette flavors and San Francisco became the first major US city to ban sales altogether. Students in Texas can face felony charges and expulsions from school for having a vape in their backpacks. It's an effort to keep the product out of the hands of teens, but the move will affect adults, too – free-thinking adults who vape for a variety of reasons such as to quit smoking or for the subculture – people like myself.

I was first introduced to vaping as a tool to quit smoking three years ago when I visited my family in Michigan. In my parents' living room playing with my niece and nephew, my brother puffed clouds of white smoke from a device that looked like a walkie-talkie with a short antenna. My stepdad shook his head with every drag. My brother held the cloud in his mouth and said: "It's just vape."

Technically, I had given up my half-pack a day habit and quit smoking years before, but the urge was still there. One beer and I'd hide out in the garage with my mom bumming her Marlboro Lights in Michigan or find myself standing in the smokers' circle outside my favorite East Village bar. Smoking was a form of social currency around other people. Alone, it offered an escape, a ceremony that felt secret and sacred.



↗ ▲ "With 5 million teens caught in this trap, I don't think bans on e-cigarette flavors will stop resourceful young people." Photograph: Steven Senne/AP

Vaping had the same benefits but felt better than smoking because I could conceal my device in a pencil case like the colorful pens I carry around. It didn't leave a lingering odor that others could detect. No one gives you side-eye or a judgmental cough if they can't see or smell it. Home in Brooklyn, I noticed vaping was everywhere. Soon, a friendly guy behind a cloud of strawberry vanilla at the local smoke shop set me up with my own device.



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The danger of vaping is that it's hidden in plain sight. Smoking is banned in nearly all public spaces, but we haven't figured out how to stop people from vaping. You can do it nearly anywhere without being noticed, and the amount of nicotine being consumed is also hidden, clicked into a sleek, Stanford University-born device. Juuls don't create a

large cloud and can easily be hidden in your hand. Airports, the movies, classrooms, places where we would never think to light up a cigarette are spaces where you can take a hit without causing a scene.

Initially, it seemed innocuous, and yet, from the beginning, it negatively affected my lifestyle. Instead of the co-working spaces and coffee shops I patronized, I soon opted to work from home so I could enjoy mid-meeting puffs of mango delight. Once, I excused myself to the bathroom during a quarterly in-person meeting with my most loyal client. In the stall, I took a small toke and held it securely in my mouth until I was certain it disappeared. My relaxing moment turned to burning fear as the fire alarm sounded throughout the building. I thought about flushing my device; instead, I ran outside to meet my colleagues with a red face. I spent the night Googling whether I had caused the alarm to sound. Although it was a routine drill, after that incident, bargaining with myself to work from home became part of my morning routine.

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We need to share tangible ways for people to quit – and that information should be as easy to find as the steps to fix a leaking pod

In April, when I started boxing, my hunch that vaping was hurting my body was solidified. As soon as I got good enough to throw a strong jab, the congestion in my lungs hit like a body shot and moved its way up my torso until my ears were plugged. It was time for me to quit.

It's no surprise that experts say withdrawal from vaping can be more challenging than quitting conventional cigarettes. The first time I tried to break my own two-pod-a-day addiction, I promised myself I wouldn't buy another pack. I changed my walking route so I wouldn't pass my local smoke shop every night. But by mid-morning of day one, I searched pockets of pants in my dirty laundry and old purses for pods with enough juice to get me through the day. I ended up watching a YouTube video where a shirtless high schooler with a seashell necklace told me that putting a leaking pod into the freezer for three minutes would reactivate it. "Ninety-nine-point-nine of the time it works. For you kids who are addicted to this thing like I am ..." But I was not a kid, I was a 31-year-old grownup. The shame I felt when I popped my last non-working pod into the freezer felt like rock bottom.

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Vaping wasn't something I could stomp out on the ground and move on from. Strong willpower, my embarrassment, and at the time, the CDC's recommendation that people give up vaping of all kinds until the cause of the lung damage was determined – none of it mattered. The benefit of being an adult with this addiction is that I had the resources

for cessation products, and if necessary I could work with an addiction specialist. It took hundreds of dollars' worth of the highest-dose patches and a mix of nicotine mints and gum for me to stop searching for loose pods around my apartment. With 5 million teens caught in this trap, I don't think bans on e-cigarette flavors will stop resourceful young people like the shirtless high schooler from finding ways to fend off the agitation, inability to focus, and headaches that come with trying to quit. Instead of imposing unreasonable laws, we need to figure out and share tangible ways for different people who are addicted to quit – and that information should be as easy to find as the steps to fix a leaking pod.

After I'd been off the juice for a month, I was walking to my office one morning when I saw an empty cartridge on the sidewalk. I asked myself, *if this were full, would I pick it up and use it?* The answer was yes. Another hit, another drag, another puff, just one more. It doesn't have a flame, but it never burns out.