

Teens Who Vape Are at High Risk of Severe COVID-19 Illness

A new study says one in three teens and young adults are at high risk of COVID-19 because of chronic diseases—and smoking and vaping.

By **Libby Ryan** | July 16, 2020

Lost in the noise of the many risk factors for COVID-19 is last year's top lung disease concern: the damage done to teens' lungs from using e-cigarettes. And although early beliefs about coronavirus fixated on the idea that young people are at less of a risk from COVID-19, evidence has increasingly said that teens and young adults can develop serious complications from the disease. In fact, a new study says one-third of teens and young adults are at high risk of COVID-19 because of chronic diseases—and smoking and vaping.

The study, published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, suggests that those who smoke are at a high risk of the coronavirus creating serious problems for already damaged lungs. And with about 20 percent of high schoolers reporting using e-cigarettes or vapes in recent years, this study could help to explain why more young people are being hospitalized with COVID-19 than experts previously predicted. The rates are going up: Between April and June, the rate for hospitalizations for coronavirus patients has gone up nearly 300 percent.

From what doctors have seen in the past four months of the coronavirus pandemic, a COVID-19 patient's prognosis can vary widely. It all depends on their body's response to the virus—and their personal underlying risk factors, such as chronic disease or underlying conditions. And the study found that smoking is more of a risk than either asthma or obesity.

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"Recent evidence indicates that smoking is associated with a higher likelihood of COVID-19 progression, including increased illness severity, ICU admission or death," study author [Sally Adams](#), Ph.D., a researcher in the [UCSF Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine](#), said [in a press release](#). "Smoking may have significant effects in young adults, who typically have low rates for most chronic diseases."

But as parents learned last year, when mysterious illnesses were striking down teens with frequent vaping habits, using e-cigarettes can do far more damage to young people's lungs than they might realize.

"Efforts to reduce smoking and e-cigarette use among young adults would likely lower their vulnerability to severe [COVID-19]," said senior author [Charles Irwin Jr.](#), M.D., of the [UCSF Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine](#).

Your first instinct may be to think that you know, with 100 percent certainty, that your teen isn't affected by this news. But other studies have shown that millions of high schoolers and even [up to 4.8 percent of middle schoolers](#) use some sort of e-cigarette product—and teens are also pretty smart about hiding the evidence. Remember when parents countrywide panicked about kids disguising vapes as watches and even hoodies? This is why it is worth having a serious conversation about the fact that their smoking habits put them at more of a risk of getting seriously sick from the coronavirus, especially considering COVID-19's continuing spread in many parts of the country.

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The majority of teen smokers probably won't like thinking of themselves as part of a high-risk group. So it's good to discuss the risks in plain terms: Yes, the coronavirus has had the worst effects on older populations, but there are many young people who have contracted the disease, developed serious, long-lasting complications, and some who have even lost their lives.

With so many kids at risk of developing serious COVID-19 symptoms if they contract the disease, preventative measures are even more important than previously thought for families of teens. That means [masking up when going outside](#), washing hands frequently, and [continuing to social distance whenever possible](#).