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Singapore

# Don't 'wait for the problem to get bigger': Growing alarm in Singapore over vapes being used to take drugs

Authorities have seized vape pods containing cannabis.



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 25 Feb 2025 06:00AM  
 (Updated: 25 Feb 2025 10:48AM)

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SINGAPORE: Lawmakers, social service providers, parents and even youths in Singapore have increasingly raised concerns over the use of vaping devices to consume illegal drugs.

The topic has been brought up in parliament on multiple instances in this year alone.

Last Tuesday (Feb 18), Member of Parliament Christopher de Souza asked what was being done to combat the "emerging trend" of drug traffickers concealing controlled drugs within vapes, particularly at Singapore's checkpoints.

In a written reply, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said authorities were working closely on detection, deterrence and and pre-arrival screening measures. He also said such cases remain the minority of all drug seizures.

Mr de Souza's question came on the tail of MP Wan Rizal asking, earlier in the month, about support for adolescents found using drug-laced vapes, which can contain substances such as etomidate and ketamine.

Etomidate is an anaesthetic agent classified as a poison, while ketamine is a controlled drug.

In January, several other MPs also raised questions on the government's assessment of the risk of vapes being used as an apparatus for drugs, and whether the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) would consider categorising these vapes and their associated paraphernalia under the same legal framework as the drugs themselves.

In response, Minister of State for Home Affairs Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim said the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) and Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) have come across "some" of such cases, which form the minority of vaping activity in Singapore.

Vaping is regulated by HSA while CNB, which falls under the purview of MHA, is the primary drug enforcement agency.

At the start of the year, authorities found several "Kpods" - vape juice mixed with etomidate - among a seizure of over 8,700 vapes and components.

In April 2024, 65 vapes suspected to contain the main psychoactive compound in cannabis were also seized during a raid.

Responding to CNA's queries, a CNB spokesperson said there have been "sporadic cases" where vapes have been used to consume controlled drugs.

It added that individuals whose urine is found to be positive for controlled drugs, "regardless of the mode through which it was ingested", will be investigated under the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA).

"The possession of any apparatus or article, including vapes, for the consumption of controlled drugs, is an offence under section 9 of the MDA," the CNB spokesperson reiterated.



The Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) has come across some cases of people using vapes to consume controlled drugs. They form the minority of vape cases in Singapore. CNB takes a zero-tolerance approach towards the consumption...see more

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### WORRY OVER "NEW TREND"

During the parliament sitting in January, MP Tan Wu Meng shared with the House concerns he had heard from young residents in his Clementi ward.

According to Dr Tan, a 13-year-old was worried about vaping catching on in schools while a 16-year-old was concerned about vaping pods having illegal drugs.

Speaking with CNA, Dr Tan said these secondary school students had heard "secondhand" accounts of such vaping behaviour. He and his volunteers have also been approached by students in institutes of higher learning, who voiced similar concerns.

"They are not vape consumers themselves but they have heard of these cases," said the medical doctor by profession. "Some of them know of friends who have gotten into vaping, and so they are also concerned (for) their friends."

Parents too are worried about what they see as a "new trend" of vapes containing not just nicotine but illegal substances, said Dr Tan.

"If you combine more prevalent vaping with illegal drug suppliers trying to supply drugs through the vaping routes, parents are worried that this could be a significant problem in Singapore."

He asked if it would be better for agencies to move much more decisively now, "rather than wait for the problem to get bigger".

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MP Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim, who sat on Singapore's National Council Against Drug Abuse until the end of last year, expressed similar concerns.

He cited a news report on how one in six vapes confiscated in British schools last year were laced with animal tranquiliser xylazine - better known as a "zombie drug" which can cause heart attacks, seizures and psychotic episodes.

The "discreet" nature of vaping lends itself to be susceptible to be used for drug abuse, he added, warning about the risk of vaping becoming a gateway to drugs.

Mr Zhulkarnain said the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Home Affairs and Law - which he chairs - also has concerns whether CNB can play a bigger role that "sends a different messaging from HSA".

He acknowledged, however, that in the United States for example, e-cigarettes fall under the Food and Drug Administration agency.

"I think countries around the world look at it as a health issue rather than an ... anti-drug issue."

His GPC meanwhile is looking at ways to beef up monitoring of not just sales and purchases of vapes, but advertisements.

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### VAPE USERS AS YOUNG AS 12

Social service agencies CNA spoke to also pointed to what they see as a "growing trend" of young people using vapes to consume controlled drugs.

At Fei Yue Community Services' recent engagement sessions with teenagers, some have mentioned friends consuming vapes that contain drugs, though the type was not specified, said senior social worker Jedidiah Chong.

He said youths may be misinformed and misguided into thinking that using vapes to consume drugs was "safer" and less harmful than taking drugs directly; as well as that this cannot be traced by authorities.

Youth Guidance Outreach Services' community rehabilitation centre case manager Linus Lim pointed out that it can be difficult to prove the use of controlled drugs with vapes, as they are often synthesised with various chemicals, making detection through conventional urine tests "unlikely".

"The accessibility and lack of detectability for controlled drugs in vapes (such as Kpods) becoming a growing issue among the youth in Singapore, does pose a new challenge," he added.

Care Corner Singapore has also started hearing more about Kpods in recent months, said its senior social worker for youth services Flora Tan.

These tend to marketed as a less lethal, more convenient alternative to drugs, requiring no preparation and promising a "good kick" with just a few inhales, she said.

"We are seeing users as young as 12 years old experimenting with Kpods, to 18- to 19-year-olds taking Kpods regularly."

Acquiring Kpods often involves a network of suppliers reached through street connections, with prices ranging from S\$50 to S\$100 (US\$37 to US\$74), said Ms Tan.

She said one way to address vape devices now being used to consume drugs was to convey "stronger messaging" that anyone using vapes will be apprehended.

But ultimately, she added, cutting down and stamping out vape usage among youths comes from increasing their sense of accountability and awareness.

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