



Nadine Chua

When Joe (not his real name) wanted a vaping fix, the 15-year-old would whip out his phone, scan through a series of Telegram groups and pick a seller based on price.

A “delivery man” would be near his home with an e-vaporiser laced with etomidate – an anaesthetic – within two hours. It was that easy, the teenager said.

“It was honestly very difficult to quit. Some of my friends brought their Kpods to school, and they would ask if I wanted to use them.

“We would usually just hang out in the toilets to vape, miss classes and get high,” said Joe, whose parents gave him permission to speak to The Straits Times.

They wanted his story to serve as a warning to others about the addictive nature of Kpods.

Checks by ST showed that Kpods, along with e-vaporisers laced with synthetic cannabinoids, are sold openly on messaging platform Telegram.

The sellers list the items according to flavours, and the waiting time was usually within two hours, as Joe described.

During a Health Sciences Authority (HSA) operation on July 10 that ST covered, an alleged Kpod seller had turned up in Bishan Street 13 within an hour of the order.

He was subsequently cornered by enforcement officers, who seized 28 vape devices and 814 vape pods. ST understands the majority of the pods may be Kpods.

Kpod users and sellers are often young. On June 23, a 22-year-old alleged user and seller was caught in her residence in Yishun Avenue 6.

With vaping on the rise in Singapore and around the world, experts said the issue is concerning as Kpods could be a gateway to drugs. The issue is compounded by a regional boom in drug production, easy access to vape devices as well as an increasingly permissive attitude towards vaping and drug-taking among younger people here.

Mr Gopal Mahey, senior counselor at the Centre for Psychotherapy, said it is now common to hear of 13- or 14-year-olds who vape regularly.

Many of his clients are aged between 15 and 25, and started vaping in secondary school.

“What’s concerning is that they often pick up vaping before they’ve formed a sense of emotional regulation, healthy coping tools or good decision-making,” he said.

He added that vaping can become an emotional crutch. “It’s not just about curiosity, it’s also about soothing boredom, managing stress or blending in. That’s why the age drop is so troubling.

“You’re embedding avoidance behaviours before the person even learns to tolerate discomfort or regulate emotions.”

According to the US National Centre for Health Statistics, people aged 18 to 24 were most likely to use e-cigarettes among all adults in 2021. In the same year, 69 per cent of vape users in Britain were 11 to 17 years old.

A study by the Health Promotion Board published in June showed that despite Singapore’s total ban on e-vaporisers since 2018, adoption among youth has risen.

The authors said it has “been driven by emerging but incomplete evidence of harms, counter-narratives from the tobacco industry, and the pervasive influence of social media”.

There were 2,000 cases of students including those from institutes of higher learning (IHLs) reported for possessing or using e-

DEADLY COCKTAIL

Easy access and lax attitudes driving Kpod scourge in S’pore

Experts say Kpods could be a gateway to drugs. The issue is compounded by a regional boom in drug production. Can enhanced enforcement work to prevent an epidemic?



vaporisers in 2024. This is up from 800 cases in 2022, and 900 cases in 2023.

A study by the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore and National University Health System, found a “conspicuous vaping culture among young people” in Singapore.

The researchers noted that despite its illegal status, vaping was perceived as appealing due to the novelty flavours, ease of use and convenient access.

Dr Sharen Tian, a family physician at Raffles Medical, said Kpods have added complexity to the vaping issue.

“The emergence of illicit substances like etomidate in e-vaporisers has intensified concerns, as these products are often marketed discreetly, making them accessible to younger demographics,” she added.

Former Jurong GRC MP Tan Wu Meng, who had previously brought up the vaping issue in Parliament, said the scourge is concerning as Kpods could be a gateway for users to try harder drugs.

PERMISSIVE ATTITUDE

The vaping surge is emerging amid a concerning trend in Singapore – an increasingly permissive attitude towards drug taking.

A survey by the National Council Against Drug Abuse in 2020 found that about 18 per cent of those aged 18 to 30 thought that it was all right to try drugs as long as one does not get addicted.

A separate study published in 2022, which public opinion company YouGov did in collaboration with ST, showed that those aged between 18 and 24 were more likely to have their views on drugs shaped by social media and pop culture than their elders.

Figures from the Central Narcotics Bureau, released in February 2025, showed that despite a slight fall in the total number of drug abusers arrested in 2024, there was a 30 per cent surge in new drug abusers arrested who were under 20 years old.

New abusers below the age of 30 accounted for more than half of all new cases for the second year in a row. Methamphetamine, or Ice, remained the drug of choice in 2024 for those below 20 years old.

A 2022 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that drug abuse among youth had reached record levels in many countries.

The number of deaths worldwide associated with drug abuse also rose over the years, reaching about half a million deaths in 2019.

Worrying reports of a boom in the production of drugs, including the synthetic variants, in Southeast Asia have emerged against this backdrop.

The UNODC, in a report in May, said the illicit manufacture and trafficking of synthetic drugs from the Golden Triangle, an area where north-eastern Myanmar meets parts of Thailand and Laos, have grown exponentially.

There has also been a rise in the illicit manufacture of pharmaceutical products, especially etomidate and its analogues, which the UNODC said is designed to evade controls on novel substances, or what Singapore refers to as new psychoactive substances (NPS).

The report notes the growing availability of synthetic and “semi-synthetic” cannabinoids in vaping products in countries worldwide.

An earlier UNODC report revealed that organised crime groups were manufacturing several etomidate analogues, which have been identified in East and South-east Asian countries, after the jurisdictions introduced regulations to address the non-medical use of etomidate.

Etomidate first appeared in significant amounts in China after synthetic cannabinoids were scheduled as a controlled drug there, according to the UNODC.



A car being searched by an officer from the Health Sciences Authority during an operation targeting vaping offences in Bishan Street 13 on July 10. An alleged Kpod seller had turned up there within an hour of the order. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO



An officer from the Health Sciences Authority counting the number of vaping devices seized during a raid at a residence in Yishun on June 23. Vaping is on the rise in Singapore and around the world. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

The increase in the illicit use of pharmaceutical products came about as drug suppliers sought substitutes for mainstream drugs such as methamphetamine and heroin, sometimes to get around emerging drug controls of NPS.

Yio Chu Kang MP Yip Hon Weng highlighted the natural progression in the cat-and-mouse game between syndicates and the authorities.

“Drug-laced vapes – whether it’s Kpods with etomidate, or pods infused with cannabis or ketamine – are the next frontier,” he added.

Dr John Shepherd Lim, chief well-being officer of the Singapore Counselling Centre, sees more young people who use vapes and Kpods, some as young as 13 years old.

“They start out with vapes laced with nicotine, then they move to Kpods, which has etomidate. It’s a matter of time before syndicates and suppliers lace vape devices with cocaine and heroin,” he said.

“Other countries have it, which means it may be an issue that Singapore may soon have to deal with,” he added.

The UNODC said that in Singapore, HSA has reported tracing synthetic cannabinoids, methamphetamine and ketamine in e-vaporisers that were seized.

Most of the vapes sold in Singapore arrive from overseas, including via the land checkpoints.

They are easily available online, despite efforts by the authorities to clamp down on listings.

From January 2024 to March 2025, over 6,800 online listings of vapes and their related components were removed from e-commerce and social media platforms – more than double the 3,100 listings removed in 2023.

Those platforms included Facebook, Instagram and Carousell, but not Telegram.

HSA said in July that more than 600 Telegram groups advertising or selling vapes and Kpods to Singaporeans have been taken down since April 2024.

Yet vape sales persist on Telegram, with channels reaching more than 27,000 members.

THE DANGERS OF KPODS

Assistant Professor Yvette van der Eijk from NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health said the addition of etomidate in e-vaporisers is “very concerning”, as the anaesthetic can cause loss of consciousness, respiratory depression and other serious damage.

“It is also not clear how etomidate, or other drugs added into vaping products, interact with oth-

er ingredients in vapes,” she said.

“It is important to consider these too as these interactions can result in deadly cocktails,” she added.

Dr Clare Anne Fong, associate consultant at the Division of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine at the National University Hospital and Alexandra Hospital, said etomidate on its own is not considered very addictive, especially when compared with opioids or benzodiazepines, which are depressants, as it does not activate the brain’s dopamine reward system directly.

However, she noted that Kpods also contain nicotine, which is very addictive as it stimulates the reward system of the brain.

“Because nicotine is inhaled with etomidate, and etomidate alters one’s level of consciousness (similar to a ‘high’), Kpods are likely more addictive than traditional vapes,” said Dr Fong.

There are no known reports of deaths directly linked to the use of laced e-vaporisers in Singapore.

But a report published by the HSA’s Forensic Medicine Division in 2019 showed that there were four fatal cases related to the use of NPS here since 2016.

In Britain, Professor Christopher Pudney of the University of Bath said schoolchildren have unknowingly smoked vapes spiked with synthetic drugs.

Prof Pudney and his team of researchers found that out of 596 confiscated vapes tested across 38 schools there, one in six contained Spice, or synthetic cannabinoids.

Vaping is regulated in Britain, where it is illegal to sell vapes to anyone under 18. But studies have shown that young people there start using e-vaporisers from between the ages of 13 and 16.

Prof Pudney said that so far, nobody has died from using vapes containing drugs despite reports of students collapsing in schools.

“The saving grace was this happened in schools, and there were plenty of people around to raise the alarm. There were trained first-aiders and adults present,” the biotechnology expert said.

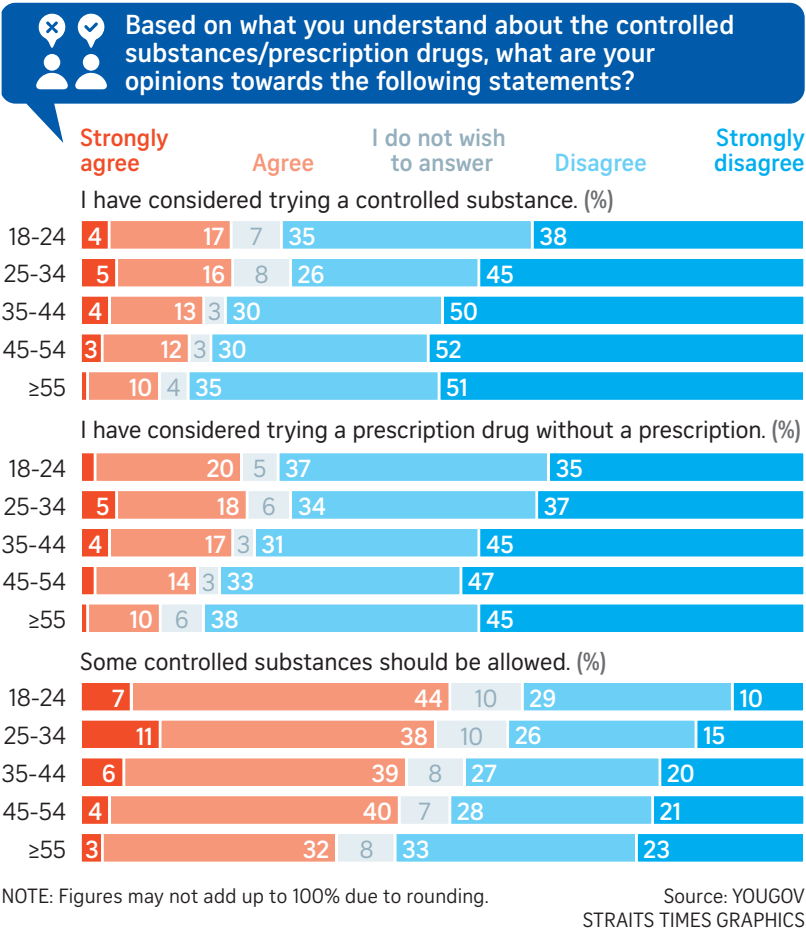
“The worst case that I’ve heard is of this person who stopped breathing. That’s the worst. That’s the closest to death.”

In Singapore, the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA) was amended to address attempts to circumvent regulations around NPS.

Parliament passed amendments in 2023 that allowed NPS to be regulated based on their effects rather than specific chemical structures.

Those who contaminate or lace substances with NPS can also be convicted under the MDA.

How Singapore residents across different age groups perceive drugs



MENTAL WELL-BEING

- National helpline: 1771 (24 hours) / 6669-1771 (via WhatsApp)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1-767 (24 hours) / 9151-1767 (24 hours CareText via WhatsApp)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Chat, Centre of Excellence for Youth Mental Health: 6493-6500/1
- Women’s Helpline (Aware): 1800-777-5555 (weekdays, 10am to 6pm)
- The Seniors Helpline: 1800-555-5555 (weekdays, 9am to 5pm)

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- TOUCH Care Line (for caregivers): 6804-6555
- Counselling and Care Centre: 6536-6366
- We Care Community Services: 3165-8017
- Shan You Counselling Centre: 6741-9293
- Clarity Singapore: 6757-7990

ONLINE RESOURCES

- mindline.sg/fsmh
- eC2.sg
- tinklefriend.sg
- chat.mentalhealth.sg
- carey.carecorner.org.sg (for those aged 13 to 25)
- limitless.sg/talk (for those aged 12 to 25)

classified under the law – without waiting a long time for approval.”

TACKLING THE SCOURGE

Sembawang GRC MP Vikram Nair, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Home Affairs and Law, said the issue of drug-laced vapes in Singapore cannot be tackled by enforce-

ment alone.

“There are things the agencies can do to shut down the Telegram channels selling vapes and action can be taken against the sellers. But education is such an important component as well. I suspect many teens who vape may not understand how serious it is,” he said.

Anti-vaping campaigns like ST’s Vaping: The Invisible Crisis will certainly help inform the public, Mr Nair added.

“Ultimately, three factors need to come together for this to work: the laws, the enforcement of laws, and education.”

Ms Mariam Jaafar, who chairs the GPC for Health, said it was troubling to see the rise in vaping among young people.

“There are some misleading narratives that vaping is safe, that it can help smokers quit, for example. Such relaxed attitudes can open the door to more serious drug abuse. We can’t let it take root,” she added.

Ms Mariam, also an MP for Sembawang GRC, said there is a strong case to be made for the Ministry of Home Affairs to consider classifying etomidate under the MDA.

Like Mr Nair, she called for greater education in schools and in the community and more support for those trying to quit vaping.

From January 2024 to March 2025, about 2,600 students were referred to HSA by schools and IHLs for vaping.

The Ministry of Health and HSA have informed medical practitioners that they should get patients to surrender their e-vaporisers and consider sending their urine samples for testing.

Medical practitioners and public healthcare institutions have also been told to record all suspected and confirmed etomidate-linked vaping cases.

Meanwhile, schools have sent advisories to parents through Parents Gateway, an app that connects parents and schools on key administrative matters. The advisory features warnings of the dangers of vaping and offers guidance on how parents can protect their children.

Mr Yip agreed that more can be done.

“Singapore already has some of the world’s toughest drug laws. But as the landscape evolves, so must our legal tools.”

He added: “There is perhaps scope to go further – for example, by explicitly including combo drug-vape products under the Misuse of Drugs Act, and granting the Central Narcotics Bureau clearer jurisdiction the moment drug traces are detected.”

nadinechua@sph.com.sg

• Additional reporting by Andrew Wong and Zaihan Mohamed Yusof

AN EMOTIONAL CRUTCH?

What’s concerning is that they often pick up vaping before they’ve formed a sense of emotional regulation, healthy coping tools or good decision-making... It’s not just about curiosity, it’s also about soothing boredom, managing stress or blending in. That’s why the age drop is so troubling.



MR GOPAL MAHEY, senior counsellor at the Centre for Psychotherapy, who says it is now common to hear of 13- or 14-year-olds who vape regularly.

MISLEADING NARRATIVES

There are some misleading narratives that vaping is safe, that it can help smokers quit, for example. Such relaxed attitudes can open the door to more serious drug abuse. We can’t let it take root.



MS MARIAM JAAFAR, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health and is an MP for Sembawang GRC.