

V5 May 2025. Cornwall Council Drug and Alcohol Action Team [daat@cornwall.gov.uk](mailto:daat@cornwall.gov.uk)

## Vaping Controlled Substances: Guidance for Professionals Working with Young People

This guidance is to support professionals working with young people to respond to incidents involving controlled substances and vaping.

This guidance has been produced by the Drug and Alcohol Action Team in Cornwall Council with partners (Public Health, Education, YZUP, Police etc.)

Version	Date	Details
1	12/03/24	Initial document
2	15/04/24	Refined wording
3	17/05/24	Simplified wording Clarification on law around nicotine-free vapes
4	23/05/24	Added- ambulance call-offs and parent/carer role (pg.4)
5	24/05/25	Updated title, context, links and page numbers

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### Resources:

- Guidance for Education Settings is available via Services for Schools
- [Information sheet for parents and carers](#)
- [Synthetic cannabinoid vaping information sheet provided by YZUP](#). *Harm reduction advice only to be issued to YPs who are at risk of/have expressed continued use of synthetic cannabinoids.*
- Information on vapes and drugs <https://www.talktofrank.com/drug/vapes>
- Young People's Substance Awareness and Screening training- free, online or face to face training delivered by YZUP. Book [here](#).
- Healthy Cornwall [Vaping resources for young people](#) (nicotine/nicotine-free vapes)
- [Vaping and E-Cigarettes: Facts for parents and carers leaflet](#)

### A. Context

A number of incidents occurred in Spring/Summer 2024 related to young people in Cornwall vaping substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971). Some young people have experienced adverse effects resulting in hospitalisation. Other areas of the country have experienced similar incidents. Testing of vapes from incidents in Plymouth confirmed the presence of THC and Synthetic cannabinoids (spice).

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## B. Risks and substances

Any drugs obtained illegally are unregulated therefore the ingredients, strengths and the associated effects are unpredictable. This includes vaping products obtained illegally.

Only forensic testing can confirm the content of illegal products. Substances cannot be distinguished through sight, smell or taste. Although recent incidents are linked to (suspected) THC/spice, products could contain any substance.

- **THC** (Tetrahydrocannabinol): linked to getting high/stoned. Originates from the cannabis plant.
- **CBD** (Cannabidiol): does not play a key role in getting high/stoned. Originates from the cannabis plant.
- **Synthetic cannabinoids** (spice): manufactured in laboratories and do not originate from the cannabis plant. Spice is a street name.

Vaping is a very fast acting method of taking a drug. It can take less than one minute to experience effects- much quicker than taking a drug orally. Given the potency of synthetic cannabinoids and the unpredictability of THC strength this is a high risk.

THC/Spice vaping products can come in several forms- a disposable vape device or in a liquid form that can be added to some vaping devices.

THC vapes typically cost around £60. A vape costing less than £50 is unlikely to contain THC and could contain other substances such as Spice. However, price point is no guarantee of contents.

## C. The law

**Nicotine:** Selling nicotine vapes to under 18s is illegal. It is not illegal for an under 18 to use a nicotine vape.

**Nicotine-free vapes:** it is not illegal to sell a nicotine free vape to an under 18 although this is expected to change with the introduction of new legislation.

**CBD** based cannabis products are legal and regulated if they are bought legally.

**Vapes containing (suspected) THC and Synthetic cannabinoids:** Class B drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act. Possession and/or supply of these is illegal.

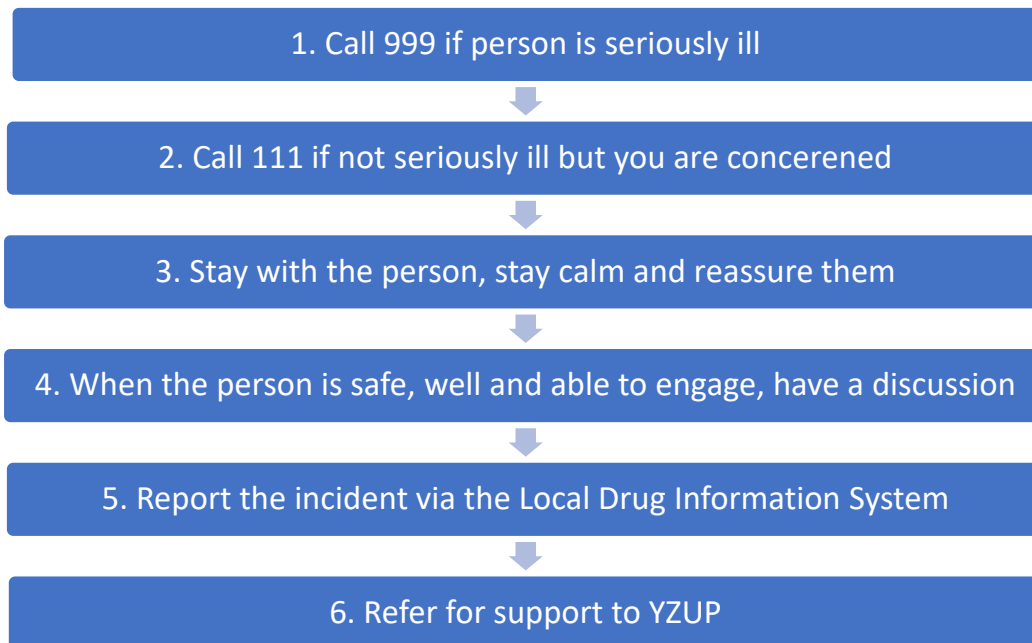
It is important to provide reassurance to young people that staff and paramedics are first and foremost interested in their wellbeing. Young people should never hesitate to ask for support or call 999.

**Sharing versus supplying:** in law supplying includes distributing (section 37(1) of the Misuse of Drugs Act) and does not require proof of payment or reward. Therefore, sharing a vape containing illegal drugs is supplying.

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However, when thinking about supplying versus sharing, consider the context and what is in the YP's best interests regarding their needs and vulnerabilities. Safeguarding the young person is paramount and exploitation should be considered. A discussion between the setting, Police and partners (e.g. Youth Justice Service and YZUP), will determine the best response.

#### D. Incident response steps and reporting



#### Overdose symptoms

- Feeling or being sick
- Inability to move
- Convulsions
- Agitation
- Confusion
- Delusions
- Lethargy
- Dizziness, drowsiness or weakness
- Breathing difficulties
- Chest pain
- Heart palpitations
- Seizures
- Anxiety, paranoia, suicidal thoughts, psychosis, hallucinations
- Loss of consciousness

#### 1. Call 999 if anyone is showing signs of being seriously ill:

- being sick
- dizziness
- sudden, noticeable heartbeats (palpitations)
- breathing difficulties
- uncontrollable restlessness or agitation
- seizures (fits)
- drowsiness or loss of consciousness

- **Never call-off an ambulance** even if you think someone has recovered. Overdose symptoms can be unpredictable as contents of illegal drugs are unknown. Someone may become ill again. Wait for advice from paramedics.
  - If a parent/carers wants to take their child home or to hospital before an ambulance arrives, advise that they must wait for advice from paramedics.
  - Clinicians will advise parent/carers on whether the YP needs to go to hospital and if it is safe for them to transport the child themselves.
  - Log what has been agreed in your notes or incident/accident book.
  - Check-in later by ringing parent/carers to see if the child did attend hospital.
  - If the YP did not attend hospital despite clinicians' advice this is a safeguarding issue. Make a [MARU referral](#).
- 2. Call NHS 111 for advice if a person does not appear to be seriously ill but you are concerned.**
  - 3. Stay with a person if they are ill or experiencing negative effects.**  
Try to remain calm and explain to them what has happened - they may be confused and unsure of what is happening.
  - 4. Have a discussion with the young person and involve other partners.**  
Do this in a safe and confidential space and only when they have recovered and are feeling well enough to engage. Consider who would be best to have the conversation.

Any consequences should be proportionate and take a safeguarding-first approach. Other partners must be involved- police, YZUP and services supporting the YP such as Social Care and Youth Justice Service.

Use the [messaging to young people](#) on page 5 this document and the Synthetic cannabinoid vaping information sheet provided by YZUP. Include:

- a. Vapes are not allowed on site meaning we will confiscate the products.
- b. Parents/Carers will be informed.
- c. Establish if a nicotine/nicotine-free vape or suspected to contain illegal substances. What does the YP think was in the vape? How much did it cost?
- d. How was the vape/product obtained? Online, dealer, friend, shop?
- e. Explain the risk, harms and law.
- f. General wellbeing and their life. Wider concerns/issues affecting YP. Think about their needs and vulnerabilities with regard to whole family's needs and contextual safeguarding.
- g. If suspected to be an illegal drug (e.g. THC or spice) give products to the police- call 101 or report via the [police portal](#). Share any information you have related to supply.
- h. Supplying/sharing on site- inform the police and engage with other partners.

- i. Do they intend to continue to use vapes containing illegal drugs? Liaise with YZUP to issue harm reduction advice and see pg. 5 onwards of YZUP Synthetic cannabinoids info sheet.

*Whilst the safest option is to not use drugs, we recognise that some YPs will. In these circumstances our priority is keeping YPs as safe as possible by issuing information that supports informed decisions and minimises harm.*

- j. Escalate any exploitation / safeguarding concerns.
- k. Offer follow-up conversations to check-in or a conversation with another professional such as YZUP.

## **5. Report any incidents or intelligence via the Local Drug Information System (LDIS) for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Here:**

<https://letstalk.cornwall.gov.uk/embeds/projects/8475/survey-tools/28623>

This not a substitute for reporting to the Police or escalating to Safeguarding but is a requirement **in addition to**.

## **6. Contact YZUP for additional support related to substance use.**

YZUP are the young persons' drugs and alcohol support service in Cornwall (ages 11-17). If the YP does not want to be referred to YZUP, still make contact as YZUP will offer advice, support and joint work to try to engage the YP.

If a YP living in Devon or Plymouth wants individual support for drugs/alcohol at their school/college in Cornwall they can be referred to YZUP.

If they want support delivered outside of school/college refer to:

- **Plymouth:** SHARP, [harbour.org.uk/find-services/young-people/](http://harbour.org.uk/find-services/young-people/), 01752 434343
- **Devon:** Y-Smart, [www.y-smart.org.uk](http://www.y-smart.org.uk), 0800 121 4751

## **E. Messaging and support for young people**

### Messaging to young people

- If you don't vape already, it's safest not to start.
- To avoid getting ill or any other harm it's safest not to use vapes bought illegally. This is because they are not regulated meaning they could contain anything. They might contain different substances to what they say they contain.
- How much a vape costs does not guarantee what is in it.
- Spice is a synthetic cannabinoid. It is manufactured and has nothing to do with the cannabis plant.
- Vaping THC can be very unpredictable because there is a lot of variation in strengths. High strength THC can have a similar effect as spice.
- THC and Synthetic cannabinoids like spice are illegal to possess or supply.

- Sharing a vape with illegal drugs in it with another person counts as supplying.
- If you are worried about people involved in supplying vapes containing drugs you can speak to an adult you trust such as a teacher, school nurse, or YZUP worker. They can help.
- Synthetic cannabinoids like spice are potent. This means it's easy to use too much and experience unpleasant and harmful effects.
- Using drugs can suggest other worries. Do you have someone you trust that you can talk to? How are you feeling? Do you have any worries or fears?
- If you choose to still use substances like THC or spice, be informed. Risk can never be removed but there are some things you can do to reduce the risk of harm. *Issue harm reduction advice using pg 5 onwards of the YZUP leaflet.*  
**Referral to YZUP is essential.**

### Support

	Description	Contact
YZUP	Young persons' drug and alcohol service in Cornwall. Ages 11-17. Can work with 18+ if required.	Call 01872 300816 Online chat and referral <a href="https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/local-hubs/cornwall/services/support-for-young-people">https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/local-hubs/cornwall/services/support-for-young-people</a>
Childrens/ Young Peoples Safeguarding	Multi-agency Referral Unit (MARU). Response to concerns about the welfare or safety of a child or young person including exploitation.	Call 0300 123 1116 Email <a href="mailto:multiagencyreferralunit@cornwall.gov.uk">multiagencyreferralunit@cornwall.gov.uk</a> Inter-agency referral form: <a href="https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/childrens-services/child-protection-and-safeguarding/">https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/childrens-services/child-protection-and-safeguarding/</a>
Youth Justice Service	Support for YPs aged 10-17 involved in the criminal justice system	Email: <a href="mailto:yjs@cornwall.gov.uk">yjs@cornwall.gov.uk</a>
With You	Adult drug and alcohol service in Cornwall. Ages 18 and over.	Call 0333 2000 325 Online chat and referral information <a href="https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/local-hubs/cornwall/services/drug-and-alcohol-support-for-adults">https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/local-hubs/cornwall/services/drug-and-alcohol-support-for-adults</a>
Adult Safeguarding	Response to concerns about an adult experiencing abuse, neglect or harm.	Call 0300 1234 131(out of hours number 01208 251300) Email <a href="mailto:accessteam.referral@cornwall.gov.uk">accessteam.referral@cornwall.gov.uk</a> Online <a href="http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/safeguardingadults">www.cornwall.gov.uk/safeguardingadults</a>
Healthy Cornwall Smoking cessation	Help to quit smoking and nicotine dependency support. Any age.	Online enquiry form: <a href="#">Available Support to quit smoking - Healthy Cornwall</a> Call 01872 324200