

# Commentary: Passive vaping—it's time we see it like secondhand smoke and stand up for the right to clean air

February 24 2023, by Renee Bittoun

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Credit: Shutterstock

A medical student of mine recently said he loved the smell of vanilla in the house he shared with friends who vaped. "That's OK, right?" he asked. "Well no," I said, "If you can smell the vanilla you are probably getting nicotine as well."

[Nicotine](#) is colorless and odorless, and is extremely well absorbed

through your [respiratory tract](#), including your nose, mouth, airways and even [your ears](#).

Vapers [exhale](#) nicotine and chemicals, including the sweet-smelling flavorings. Bystanders can then breathe them in. The lung defenses of smokers, vapers and bystanders are [overwhelmed](#) by repeated exposure.

There is a lot of [vaping going on](#) in [young people](#) aged between 18 and 24. Despite a good amount of debate about the health effects of vaping, there is [scant discussion](#) around the risk of passive vaping and the consequences for the health and well-being of non-vapers and their right to inhale clean air.

## **Breathing out, breathing in**

Researchers have examined the content of exhaled vapor from users in confined spaces, [like cars](#), and larger venues. Although levels were lower than for [tobacco cigarettes](#), they [described](#) levels of the exhaled toxic substances as "ambient air pollution" that should be avoided to protect the health of non-smokers and non-vapers.

The evidence for the [effects of passive vaping on the heart](#) is emerging but researchers have compared it to passive smoking, which can clog arteries and cause clotting problems. Publications that demonstrate the [harmful respiratory effects](#) of passive vaping [are growing](#).

## **Lessons from passive smoking**

In the late 1980s, passive smoking became the impetus to change legislation around [tobacco use](#).

Health professionals had learnt decades earlier from a study of British doctors who smoked that tobacco smoking caused immense harm and

early death [in smokers](#). But later they began to understand that living with a smoker, working with smokers or having close repeated exposure to someone else's smoke could cause [lung cancer](#), chronic bronchitis, worsen asthma and heart diseases in a [non-smoker](#). The effects of [passive smoking](#) on children too were [very concerning](#).

Advocacy groups began defacing or "refacing" billboard tobacco advertising and ridiculing their advertising. In 1982, I wrote a paper published in the Medical Journal of Australia called [A Tracheostomy for the Marlboro Man](#) about these efforts, the legal repercussions and the challenges from the tobacco industry.



You can breathe in nicotine and flavourings from others' vaping. Credit: [Shutterstock](#)

By the 1990s, people had started [suing](#) hospitality venues and workplaces for putting them in harms' way by exposing them to "[secondhand smoke](#)". Successes led to changes [in legislation](#).

[Attitudes](#) changed and non-smokers' rights came to the fore. We were all able to live in a smoke-free environment in Australia for decades.

## **What does the law say about secondhand vapor?**

In Australia, vaping restrictions are in line with laws around [smoke-free areas](#) and [World Health Organization](#) recommendations.

For example, New South Wales legislation [says](#) people cannot use e-cigarettes in smoke-free areas under the Smoke-free Environment Act 2000. These include:

- all enclosed public places
- within ten meters of children's play equipment
- public swimming pools
- spectator areas at sports grounds or other recreational areas used for organized sporting events
- public transport stops and platforms, including ferry wharves and taxi ranks
- within four meters of a pedestrian access point to a public building
- commercial outdoor dining areas
- in a car with a child under 16.

Vaping on public transport vehicles such as trains, buses, light rail, ferries is also [banned](#).

But people are [still vaping](#) in their homes and other places where it's permitted. The [attitudinal change](#) that made tobacco smoking around

others [socially unacceptable](#) is yet to develop.

## Are smoke-free areas enough?

Though debate continues about vaping, its safety and efficacy as a quitting aid, we cannot wait for years, to see the full effects of passive vaping.

Based on the [public health precautionary principle](#), today's challenge is to engage and inform non-vapers, particularly young non-vapers, about their rights to be "vape free", breathe in clean air and take a stand.

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