Vaping is around for 95% of 15-18 year olds surveyed by drugs ed charity, and over 75% say it is a problem

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Survey data from just under 5,900 15-18 year olds gathered by drug education charity the DSM Foundation has shown that 95 per cent of respondents say that vaping is one of the main substances used by their peers, and over 75 per cent name it as a substance that they think is causing their peers the most problems.

The survey was carried out during the 2023-24 academic year, with students in Years 11-13 (or equivalent in Scotland) asked to complete it anonymously ahead of a workshop delivered by one of the DSM Foundation's drugs education team members. Surveying students in this way means the charity gains valuable insight into a range of topics to identify what will be of most relevance to the group they will be working with, including any drugs education the students have previously had, any subjects they particularly want covered during the DSM Foundation session, and their perceptions about substance use, behaviours and motivations of their peers.

In response to the question "Which are the main substances people in your year group use, if they do?", vaping was the most popular answer with 95 per cent citing it, followed by alcohol at 90 per cent, cannabis/weed at 67 per cent, and cigarettes at 65 per cent. The next most commonly given answer was cannabis edibles at 36 per cent, then nitrous oxide at 20 per cent, ketamine at 19 per cent, cocaine at 14 per cent, magic mushrooms 12 per cent, MDMA/ecstasy at 11 per cent, steroids at 10 per cent, LSD at 8 per cent and benzodiazepines at 4 per cent. Students were also given the option of providing alternative answers, with snus (nicotine pouches) the most common of these, named by 39 young people. Cannabinoids/THC/Spice were stated by 32 young people, and image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs) by 12.

The answers to this question were – for the most part – lower than the 2022-23 academic year when over 6,500 15-18 year olds completed the survey. Vaping was also the most popular answer in that school year with 95 per cent citing it, followed by alcohol at 93 per cent, cigarettes at 76 per cent, cannabis/weed at 74 per cent, cannabis edibles at 44 per cent, then nitrous oxide at 30 per cent, ketamine at 27 per cent, cocaine at 20 per cent, MDMA/ecstasy at 15 per cent, magic mushrooms at 12 per cent, LSD at 9 per cent, steroids at 8 per cent, and benzodiazepines at 6 per cent. All of these reflect falls into the 2023-24 academic year except vaping and steroids. Also higher for 2023-24 were snus, THC/spice/cannabinoids and IPEDs, which were mentioned by six, three and zero respondents respectively in the 2022-23 survey.

Vaping was also the most commonly given answer in response to the question "Which substances do you think cause people in your year group most problems, if anyone does have problems?" with three quarters naming it (up from 70 per cent in 2022-23). Concerns about all other substances were similar or slightly lower compared to the previous year, including alcohol which was named by just over half of respondents. Within the "other"category for this question, the three most commonly cited answers were snus (16) and cannabinoids/THC/Spice (35 YP each) and IPEDs (12 YP) for 2023-24; by comparison, in 2022-23 these were mentioned by only two respondents at most.

Students were asked about the reasons for someone their age using drugs, with "curiosity", "socializing" and "for fun/relaxation" the highest rated responses. However, over 58 per cent stated "pressure" as one of the three main reasons they thought someone their age might use drugs (up from just over 50 per cent the previous year), with around 38 per cent giving "coping with problems" and 27 per cent "addiction" in their top three (down from 42 and 28 per cent respectively on the previous year).

In terms of where young people come across drugs, nearly three quarters of respondents stated parties/gatherings, 52 per cent outdoor areas such as the park, 44 per cent someone's house, 40 per cent social media, 30 per cent online and 29 per cent at school. These figures were not markedly different to the data gathered in 2022-23.

DSM Foundation Director, Founder and Dan's mum Fiona Spargo-Mabbs said: "This data is incredibly useful for us in planning our drug education to make sure we meet the needs and priorities of students, but they also provide an invaluable insight into evolving trends, attitudes and behaviours, which inform all our wider work. It's heartening to see signs that young people's perceptions of the use of almost all substances by their peers has fallen, but these shifts are small, and can easily, unpredictably and relatively swiftly be influenced in either direction by various complex factors. The increasing appearance

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of synthetic cannabinoids, alongside reports from schools of students experiencing significant harm from vaping ‘Spice’, often unknowingly, is a real concern for us at the moment, as is unintentionally taking high doses of nicotine from something so apparently innocuous as a nicotine pouch.

“Effective drug education is absolutely key to addressing all of this, for both young people and families, and our work is very far from done. We need to remain vigilant, to listen to young people, and to make sure we work together across our communities to educate and support them to make safer choices about drugs, whatever form these take.”

Information for editors:

The DSM Foundation is a drug education charity established in 2014 following the death of 16 year old Daniel Spargo-Mabbs from an accidental overdose of ecstasy. His family felt that he simply hadn’t known enough to be able to make decisions that would keep him safe, and realized there was a huge gap in the resources and support available to schools, so set up the charity in order to spare other families going through what they had experienced.

The aim of the DSM Foundation is to provide young people with relevant, age-appropriate, up to date and evidence-based information about drugs so they develop the skills to make choices that will keep themselves and their friends as safe as possible. To this end, the charity is currently working in almost 750 schools, colleges and community organisations with children and young people, and also provides workshops for parents and caregivers, and training for school and college staff – the two groups shown by NHS survey data as the most likely sources of information about drugs and alcohol sought out by 11-15 year olds. Educational settings are also able to access “I Love You Mum, I Promise I Won’t Die”, a verbatim play by Mark Wheeller that was commissioned by the charity to tell Dan’s story in the words of his family and friends, through studying the work itself (sometimes due to it being a GCSE Drama set text on the Eduqas syllabus), or booking a Theatre in Education performance. Schools and colleges can also download age-appropriate, relevant, up to date and evidence-based drugs education lesson resources free of charge from the DSM Foundation website for delivery by teachers through PSHE/PSE provision.

For more information about the DSM Foundation, go to https://www.dsmfoundation.org.uk/.

Media enquiries about this press release or the work of the DSM Foundation should be sent to media@dsmfoundation.org.uk.

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