

The Juul Comes to School – But Also to the Aid of Adult Smokers in India

As global and local e-cigarettes gain a foothold, opinion is divided on how the benefits to adult smokers balance with the cost of their popularity with teens.

Nehmat Kaur | Feb 3, 2019

New Delhi: “I like cucumber best.”

So says 17-year-old Ishaan over Whatsapp. He’s not talking about vegetables, obviously. Cucumber is his favourite Juul flavour, even if it’s not one of the most popular. Those would be mango, or crème brulee.

Right here I’m obliged to say the two things everyone always says when a Juul is mentioned.

1. It looks like an especially sleek USB thumb-drive.
2. It’s the iPhone of the smoking industry.

If this gives you no idea about what a Juul is, you’re not alone, but you’re certainly not an elite teen or 20-something from an Indian metro. Yet the Juul, already the subject of serious health policy debates in the US, is now on the cusp of becoming a ubiquitous talking point in India.

At its most basic, a Juul is yet another ‘vaping’ device, or e-cigarette. Vapes are notionally healthier cigarette replacements: While a regular cigarette delivers nicotine with a lot of other substances known to be carcinogenic and toxic, vapes cut out all the extra smoke, offering a nicotine hit mixed with innocuous glycerin in a puff of pleasant, often dessert-smelling vapour.

No tar, no tobacco. And to make life easier: no fire, no smoke and no ash.

Nicotine itself, the logic goes, isn’t the culprit for smokers’ health issues, so might as well keep the good and sieve out the bad. The Juul took this redemptive philosophy one step further – it has been marketed ostensibly as a device to help people quit smoking.

‘Disrupting’ tobacco

Vapes had a notoriously hard time going mainstream. Most were bulky, finicky devices – a thickish pipe attached to a squat canister of ‘e-juice’. To smoke, you press a button, releasing the electrical charge to vaporise the juice as you pull. They often sizzle audibly. This is the vape at its simplest – think a circa-Y2K Nokia. You can stash them in your bag or walk around with your fist curled around it, but you can’t casually slip it into your wallet.

The Juul has no buttons, no controls, and only a soft sizzle. You ‘juul’ (yes, it’s a verb now) as you would smoke a discreet, ever-lit cigarette: just put it to your mouth and pull, sucking in tasty air, exhaling a tendril or two of fog.