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Vaping is hurting teenage athletes, dashing their future in sports

"The moment I started using nicotine, it turned off my future goals completely."

Cade Beuparlant was a promising young hockey player. Vaping took him away from the sport he loved. Kristin Beuparlant

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By Erika Edwards

Addictions to electronic cigarettes are derailing the dreams of promising young athletes, leaving them struggling to breathe, keep up with their teammates and find motivation to practice.

Take Cade Beuparlant, 18, of Newburyport, Massachusetts.

Beuparlant first laced up hockey skates when he was just a few years old, and fell in love with the sport. "Hockey was my life," he told NBC News.

His abilities on the ice developed rapidly. Hockey coaches and recruiters had their eyes on Beuparlant starting in middle school.

"He was such a hard-working, motivated, skillful young kid. He was our best defenseman," Paul Yameen, Beuparlant's high school hockey coach, said. "As soon as he started [vaping], everything changed."

Beuparlant said he was introduced to e-cigarettes during a sleepover with friends in eighth grade. He began "Juuling" in ninth grade, referring to the Juul brand of e-cigarettes, by far the most popular among teens.

Within a year, Beuparlant said he was "extremely addicted," to Juul pods. One pod has roughly the [same amount of nicotine](#) as an entire pack of cigarettes, according to Truth Initiative, a nonprofit organization that advocates for tobacco cessation.

I couldn't pull enough air into my lungs.

Beuparlant's addiction was evident on the ice.

"I couldn't stay on the ice for more than a minute and a half before being gassed," Beuparlant said. "My lungs couldn't handle it. I felt like I couldn't pull enough air into my lungs."

Left in the dark about Beuparlant's vaping, his family and doctor assumed the problem was exercise-induced asthma. They were wrong.



Cade's mother, Kristin Beuparlant, says she was devastated to find this container of empty vaping pods, illustrating her son's e-cigarette addiction. Kristin Beuparlant

But then Beuparlant was caught vaping in school. As punishment, he was stripped of his role as captain of the school hockey team and had to sit out a quarter of the season his senior year. A shoulder injury also contributed to time away from the ice.

The result? Missed opportunities to advance in the sport.

"He was being recruited. One of the coaches was coming to watch him for a prep school," Kristin Beuparlant, his mother, recalled. "Hard to do when you're not playing."

"It's a sad, unfortunate story," Yameen lamented. "There's no doubt in my mind that kid had the ability to play college hockey. No question. And that's not gonna happen."

Vaping and athletic performance

The popularity of e-cigarettes among teenagers has skyrocketed in recent years. In February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported a [78 percent increase](#) in high school students vaping from 2017 to 2018. Youth e-cigarette use has been called an epidemic by major public health officials, including the U.S. surgeon general.

And it's increasingly evident that vaping is affecting young athletes and youth athletic programs nationwide.

"You assume people who are athletes care about their bodies and their performance," said Nina McPherson, a high school swim coach in Waxhaw, North Carolina.

McPherson said that over the past few years, a growing number of her swimmers were unable to practice or perform in meets because they were too sick. "I found there seemed to be a relationship between vaping and respiratory types of illnesses," McPherson said.

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It's extremely difficult to catch kids vaping because some e-cigarettes are small and can look like a pen or flash drive. But among kids rumored to vape, McPherson said, "if they got a cold, it was much more severe."

Indeed, vaping's effects on health and athletic performance are common concerns that young adults bring up when they contact Truth Initiative's [e-cigarette cessation program](#), a free texting service that allows users to remain anonymous, while offering nonjudgmental support and age-appropriate recommendations for quitting e-cigarettes.

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The service, which launched earlier this year, has enrolled at least 13,421 teenagers, and about as many adults in their 20s.

"What we're seeing is that kids are feeling the effects of e-cigarette use, including the impact on athletic performance," Amanda Graham, a senior vice president at Truth Initiative, said.

The group provided NBC News with a sampling of some of the reasons young people are giving for wanting to quit vaping. These are not direct quotes, but examples of themes uncovered by Truth Initiative's e-cigarette quit program:

- "I don't want my lungs to hurt. I want to be healthy."
- "If I get caught, I'm off the lacrosse team."
- "I can't stand the anxiousness."
- "I have seizures."
- "I'm depressed and unmotivated because of vaping."

Other common themes include a desire to be free from addiction, the cost of e-cigarettes, and negative impacts on sexual health, including reports of erectile dysfunction thought to be linked to vaping.

The need for vaping cessation programs tailored to teenagers is expanding. "Over the past 5 years, we've seen a growing number of state quit lines change their eligibility criteria from 18 years old to younger ages," Linda Bailey, president of the North American Quitline Consortium, wrote in an email to NBC News.



Kristin

Beauparlant and her son, Cade, 18. Kristin says that after Cade began treatment for his e-cigarette addiction, he was a "different kid" - once again smiling and laughing. He even made the honor roll in school. Kristin Beauparlant

Just this month, National Jewish Health in Colorado launched a [tobacco and vaping cessation program](#) aimed specifically at kids under age 18. And once again, vaping athletes are reaching out for help.

"The athletes we're hearing from, they don't like how it feels. They start to notice that their lungs are burning when they're using the device," Thomas Ylioja, a tobacco cessation expert at National Jewish Health, said.

"We're trying to let them know, if you're feeling that, and it's your vape, that's probably a sign that it's not working for you, and you need to do something different," Ylioja said.

"It's really hard to keep up"

Trouble breathing because of vaping was one reason Madison Langer, 18, of Vancouver, Washington, gave up gymnastics. Langer was good enough to make the varsity gymnastics team in high school. She and her team traveled to state competitions.

"I didn't know anything about them. It smelled good. It looked good. I didn't have enough education to know it was dangerous," Langer said.

It wasn't long before vaping took a toll on her lungs. "It's really hard to keep up with such a high level of sport when you're breathing heavy and your lungs aren't in the best shape," she said.



After successfully quitting her e-cigarette addiction, Madison Langer, 18, works to as a peer educator to help other teens recover from substance abuse. Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids

Langer quit the team in favor of becoming a heavy user of nicotine. In addition to Juul pods, she took more concentrated nicotine in the form of liquid drops.

"Once you become a user, you lose motivation for things. The moment I started using nicotine, it turned off my future goals completely," Langer told NBC News.

Langer and Beauparlant both received treatment for their addictions. Both graduated from high school this year, and will attend college in the fall.

Langer uses her experience being heavily addicted to nicotine working with the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and as a peer educator for kids recovering from substance abuse.

"Education about vaping in schools is really important," Langer said. "We need to make sure we're looking at how we can support kids who get caught vaping and put them in contact with people who can help them."