

Pennsylvania
Department of Health

Acknowledgements

This resource guide represents a coordinated effort between the Division of Tobacco Prevention and Control at the Pennsylvania Department of Health (PA DOH) and key partners at the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP) and the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to support Pennsylvania school entities with vape disposal best management practices.

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Content of the Guide

E-cigarettes or “vapes” are the most commonly used tobacco product among U.S. middle and high school students, and the prevalence of student vaping has impacted school operations in unexpected ways.¹ One of the unanticipated consequences school personnel are navigating is the burden of disposing of vapes that are confiscated from students or left on school property.² Unfortunately, many school personnel may be unaware that vapes contain hazardous components which pose health and safety concerns for handling, storing, and disposing of the devices. In fact, vapes are considered hazardous waste when schools collect and discard them.^{3,4} Because it has properties that can be harmful to human health or the environment, certain regulatory standards must be followed when a non-residence like a school disposes of, or accumulates for disposal, items that are considered hazardous waste.^{3,4,5}

This guide is intended to support Pennsylvania school entity administrators, school resource officers, and other school personnel who are responsible for disposing of vape waste. Step-by-step guidance is provided to help school personnel follow best management practices for handling, storing, and disposing of vapes that mitigate safety concerns and comply with hazardous waste regulations — including considerations to potentially avoid additional regulatory requirements. School administrators are encouraged to work with their school resource, police, or security officer to establish protocols that promote implementation of the guidance.

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STEP 1:

**Learn about vapes
and hazardous
waste regulations.**



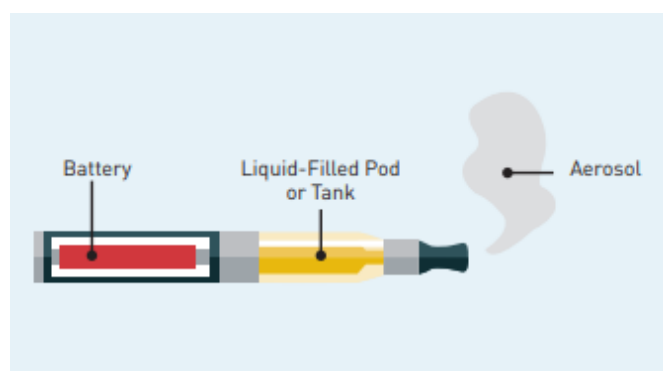
What is an e-cigarette or vape?

While “e-cigarettes” and “vapes” are more commonly used terms, the devices are also sometimes referred to as vape pens, e-hookah, e-cigs, mods, tanks, or electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS).^{4,6,7} For the purposes of this guidance, “vape” and “e-cigarette” are used interchangeably to refer to the entire broad category of products. School personnel may encounter vapes in a variety of shapes, colors, and sizes.⁴ Despite variations in appearance, vapes are comprised of like components and function similarly.⁸



Examples of different vape brands. Source: Manufacturer websites

Vapes are battery-powered devices that heat a liquid and create an aerosol for users to inhale. The liquid is often referred to as “e-liquid.” E-liquid usually contains nicotine, flavoring, propylene glycol, and other additives although it’s difficult to be certain about exactly what substances vapes contain.^{7,9,10} For example, nicotine has been detected in some devices labeled nicotine-free. In addition to nicotine, vape aerosol may contain volatile organic compounds, ultrafine particles, carcinogens, and heavy metals like nickel, tin, and lead.^{10,11} Although this guide focuses on vapes that contain nicotine, it should be noted they are also used with cannabis and other drugs.¹²



Simple diagram of vape components. Source: FDA

Regulatory Overview

Who regulates hazardous waste? The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulates the generation, storage, transport, and disposal of hazardous waste under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).^{13,14} In Pennsylvania, DEP implements the RCRA program through state authorization from EPA. Since state programs are required to adopt the minimum federal standards, they serve as PA DEP's regulations except where DEP has modified the requirements for Pennsylvania.^{15,16,17} The guidance provided throughout this document is based on both federal and state hazardous waste regulations that may apply to Pennsylvania schools disposing of vapes.

Why are vapes hazardous waste? Vapes contain nicotine and lithium batteries, which are both considered hazardous wastes.^{3,4}

Nicotine: Nicotine is considered an acute hazardous waste because of its toxicity.³ Acute hazardous wastes can be fatal even in small amounts and are regulated more stringently.^{3,18} All nicotine-containing e-liquids are considered acute hazardous waste regardless of nicotine concentration amounts.^{19,20}

Lithium batteries: Lithium batteries are likely a characteristic or non-acute hazardous waste. Non-acute hazardous wastes have certain characteristics that can be hazardous to human health or the environment.¹⁸ Lithium batteries are ignitable and reactive meaning they "can readily catch fire and sustain combustion" and "readily explode or undergo violent reactions."^{4,15,21}

How do hazardous waste regulations apply to schools?

If your school accumulates any amount of hazardous waste for disposal, including vapes, it is considered a hazardous waste generator.^{3,22} There are three categories of generators: very small quantity generator (VSQG), small quantity generator (SQG), and large quantity generator (LQG).²³ Each category is assigned specific requirements they must follow.¹⁸ Estimates suggest many schools are VSQGs based on the amount of hazardous waste generated in a calendar month. The following sections of this guide are tailored to the management standards for that generator category.³



How should schools dispose of vape waste?

Do not dispose of vapes in trash or recycling receptacles. Lithium batteries damaged by trash compactors can cause waste transporter and facility fires, and municipal solid waste services do not provide proper controls to prevent nicotine and degrading battery compounds from leaching into groundwater which can harm humans and wildlife.^{4,24}



Damaged vape waste. Source: PAVE

Most hazardous waste generators rely on a hazardous waste vendor for help with disposal, however, some schools may be able to consolidate their vape waste through an LQG under control of their school entity like a school district central office or onsite healthcare facility.⁴

Information in the following sections can help you to:

- Properly store your school's vape waste until it can be disposed.
- Estimate how much vape waste your school generates to confirm whether your school is a VSQG.
- Consider your school's disposal options to maintain your school's VSQG status and avoid additional regulatory requirements.^{4,25}

STEP 2:

**Properly handle and
store vape waste.**



- 1. Select a storage location.** Identify a secure location for storing vape waste until it can be disposed. An ideal location should be inaccessible to students, climate-controlled, and near a fire extinguisher and spill kit.²⁶
- 2. Select a storage container.** Select a container with a well-sealing lid to store vape waste. Clear, one-gallon, plastic containers are recommended to monitor the amount of waste accumulating.³ Ideally, containers should be kept in a fire-safe cabinet.²⁷
- 3. Wear chemical-resistant gloves.** Nicotine can easily be absorbed through skin contact and can cause nicotine poisoning. If feasible, wear chemical-resistant gloves (e.g., latex or nitrile) when handling vapes to prevent nicotine contact with your skin.⁴
- 4. Properly bag vapes and components.**

INTACT DISPOSABLE VAPES

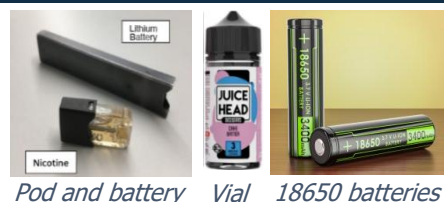
Disposable vapes likely comprise the majority of school vape waste because youth commonly use them.^{1,28} They must be stored and disposed of as intact devices since they have embedded batteries that can't be recycled and should never be removed due to fire risk.^{29,30,31}



Place each intact vape in its own separate, clear, sealed, plastic bag to prevent battery short-circuiting and fires.⁴

REUSABLE VAPE COMPONENTS

Most youth do not report using reusable vapes that have replacement nicotine cartridges called "pods," removable batteries, or require nicotine vials; however, these components could occasionally be collected with school waste.^{1,28,32}



Pod and battery Vial 18650 batteries

NICOTINE PODS AND VIALS



Multiple nicotine pods and vials can be placed in the same clear, sealed, plastic bag.⁴

LITHIUM BATTERIES



Place each battery in a separate, clear, sealed, plastic bag to prevent short-circuiting and fires.⁴



Image sources: EPA; Manufacturer sites

A Note on Battery Removal and Recycling

If your school recycles lithium batteries, they can be managed as universal waste and do not need to be counted towards your school's generator category.^{3,33,34} Since there are limitations to recycling vape batteries, it's recommended to exercise caution when deciding whether to remove and recycle them.

- Only batteries designed to be removed from certain reusable vapes can be considered for recycling. Although these types of batteries are less likely to be collected, school personnel are encouraged to consult *What a Waste! Legally Disposing of E-Cigarettes and Nicotine Products* for additional information. You may also want to confirm additional storage instructions with your school's recycler (e.g., separate storage container).
- Sometimes students modify vapes with more powerful batteries that can make them unstable. If you are concerned a device could be modified, process it as an intact vape.²⁷
- Damaged batteries (e.g., bulging or leaking) cannot be recycled and pose significant fire and explosion risks.^{3,3} They should be placed in a bucket of sand to prevent fires, and it may be helpful to confirm any additional precautions with your school's hazardous waste disposal vendor.³

5. Place all bagged vapes and components in the storage container.

6. Label the storage container.

container. Mark the container with the words, "hazardous waste," notate the hazards of the contents, and include the date the first vape was placed inside the container. Containers must be dated at the beginning of each accumulation period. This label is recommended because when completed correctly, it meets VSQG waste consolidation shipping requirements and U.S. Department of Transportation regulations.³⁵ Please see [GIR Container Labeling](#) for additional information.

HAZARDOUS WASTE

FEDERAL LAW PROHIBITS IMPROPER DISPOSAL.
IF FOUND, CONTACT THE NEAREST POLICE OR PUBLIC SAFETY
AUTHORITY OR THE U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY.

GENERATOR INFORMATION:

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____ PHONE _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

EPA /MANIFEST ID NO. / DOCUMENT NO. _____

ACCUMULATION START DATE _____ EPA WASTE NO. _____

D.O.T. PROPER SHIPPING NAME AND UN OR NA NO. WITH PREFIX

HANDLE WITH CARE!

STYLE WM1

Source: PA DEP



7. Seal the storage container. Once items have been placed inside, ensure the container is well-sealed with the lid. Containers should be kept closed during waste accumulation and should be opened only for adding or removing waste.³⁵

8. Inspect and maintain the storage container. Ensure containers are kept in good condition and inspect them regularly. Replace any containers if they become damaged in any way that compromises their ability to be well-sealed and leakproof.³⁵

Additional Handling and Storage Considerations

Obtain and stock protective supplies where staff can easily access them. In addition to providing chemical-resistant gloves and clear, resealable, plastic bags to mitigate safety risks associated with vapes, schools can also opt to provide American National Standards Institute-certified safety glasses for staff processing vape waste for storage.⁴

How should a spill be handled? If e-liquid is spilled, any residues and materials contaminated by or used to clean up the spill must be disposed of as acute hazardous waste. E-liquid should never be poured down the drain, and you should never rinse e-cigarette cartridges or components containing e-liquid because the water used must also be disposed of as acute hazardous waste.^{3,4}



STEP 3:

Monitor vape waste accumulation and determine your school's disposal options.



Estimate the vape waste your school generates.

Is your school a VSQG? Before considering your disposal options, first estimate the amount of hazardous waste your school generates in a calendar month to confirm whether your school falls within the limits for the VSQG category. Only the weight of the hazardous waste should be estimated, not the weight of non-hazardous components like plastic housing.³ Acute and non-acute hazardous wastes must be estimated separately since the thresholds differ for each.

Acute hazardous waste: Estimate the weight of nicotine e-liquids in each intact vape, pod, or vial collected during the calendar month. To exceed the VSQG limit of 2.2 pounds (lbs.), it would take:³



More than 76 EB Create
vapes



More than 1,000 JUUL
pods



More than 200 full e-liquid
5 mL vials

Non-acute hazardous waste: Estimate the weight of lithium batteries in each intact vape and all separated batteries collected during the calendar month that are not being recycled. To exceed the VSQG limit of 220 lbs., it would take:^{3,4}



≈ 2,000 18650 lithium-ion batteries



More than 7,000 JUULs

Image sources: EPA; CDC; Manufacturer sites

Although this guide is specific to vapes, all sources of hazardous waste your school generates must be included in your estimations, not just vape waste. Common examples of other sources of hazardous waste include laboratory and vocational shop chemicals, expired hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies, pesticides, and lithium batteries from other electronic waste.^{3,4}

Monitor vape waste accumulation.

VSQGs are permitted to store their hazardous waste onsite for up to one year, and, at any time, they may accumulate no more than 2.2 lbs. of acute hazardous waste and 220 lbs. of non-acute hazardous waste.^{15,25} If your school accumulates or stores more than 2.2 lbs. of acute hazardous waste onsite at any time, it could be considered an LQG, even if your school generates less than 2.2 lbs. of acute hazardous waste per calendar month.⁴

What is a simple method for monitoring generation and accumulation amounts?

Following the guidance in the previous section to limit your school's vape waste storage container size to one gallon and selecting a clear container is a good rule of thumb since a full container can provide a visual reminder your school may be approaching the 2.2 lb. acute hazardous waste limit for VSQGs. Since the acute hazardous waste threshold is much smaller, schools are likely to approach it before the non-acute hazardous waste threshold.

How are vapes counted that are retained as evidence?

Vapes retained as evidence do not need to be counted towards a school's hazardous waste generator category or storage limits until they are ready to be discarded. It's recommended to follow the same handling and storage procedures while retaining vapes as evidence to mitigate safety risks.

What if your school's vape waste already exceeds VSQG storage limits?

If the total amount of vape waste your school currently possesses already exceeds or is nearing VSQG storage limits, consider utilizing an episodic generation provision. Your school can utilize the provision once per calendar year to maintain your current VSQG status for a planned or unplanned event, such as a cleanout, that temporarily results in an amount of hazardous waste in a calendar month that would otherwise classify your school as a higher generator category. An EPA ID is required to utilize the provision, and schools can apply using [PA DEP's electronic tool](#).¹⁵ Please review sections 2.3 and 3.2 of PA DEP's [Pennsylvania Hazardous Waste Regulation Compliance Guide: Hazardous Waste Requirements](#) for additional conditions and requirements.



Consider your school's disposal options.

It is recommended for your school to send vape waste off-site regularly to avoid exceeding the VSQG limit for acute hazardous waste and becoming an LQG which is subject to more extensive regulatory requirements — either through waste consolidation or by contracting with a hazardous waste vendor.⁴

Determine if your school entity can consolidate your school's vape waste.

Check if there is an LQG that your school is under the control of (e.g., school district central office) to which you can send your school's vape waste for consolidation. While the label recommended in the previous section is intended to help schools meet shipping requirements for hazardous waste consolidation, certain conditions must also be met by the LQG receiving the waste.¹⁵ Please see PA DEP's [Pennsylvania Hazardous Waste Regulation Compliance Guide: Hazardous Waste Generator Requirements](#) for additional information.

Sending your school's vape waste to an onsite healthcare facility (e.g., school nurse's office or clinic) under the control of your school entity for consolidation may be an option, but there are limitations.⁴ The healthcare facility must manage its hazardous waste pharmaceuticals waste under EPA's [Management Standards for Hazardous Waste Pharmaceuticals and Amendment to the P075 Listing for Nicotine](#), but EPA estimates the majority of healthcare facilities are VSQGs which are not subject to the rule.^{4,20} Please see 40 CFR Part 266, Subpart P sections [266.500](#), [266.504\(b\)\(1\)](#), [266.502\(l\)](#), and [266.503\(b\)](#) for additional information.

If waste consolidation is not an option, identify a hazardous waste vendor that will accept vapes.

Check with your school's hazardous waste disposal vendor to determine if they accept vape waste. Ensure the vendor meets at least one of the commercial hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facility requirements in PA DEP's [Hazardous Waste Generator Requirements for Very Small Quantity Generators](#). You can explore transporting your school's waste (depending on your school's hazardous waste generator category and distance to the closest facility) or hiring a hazardous waste transporter licensed in Pennsylvania (please see [Hazardous Waste Transporters](#)), but it may be most convenient to check with your hazardous waste vendor to determine if they offer pickup services for a charge.³⁶



STEP 4:

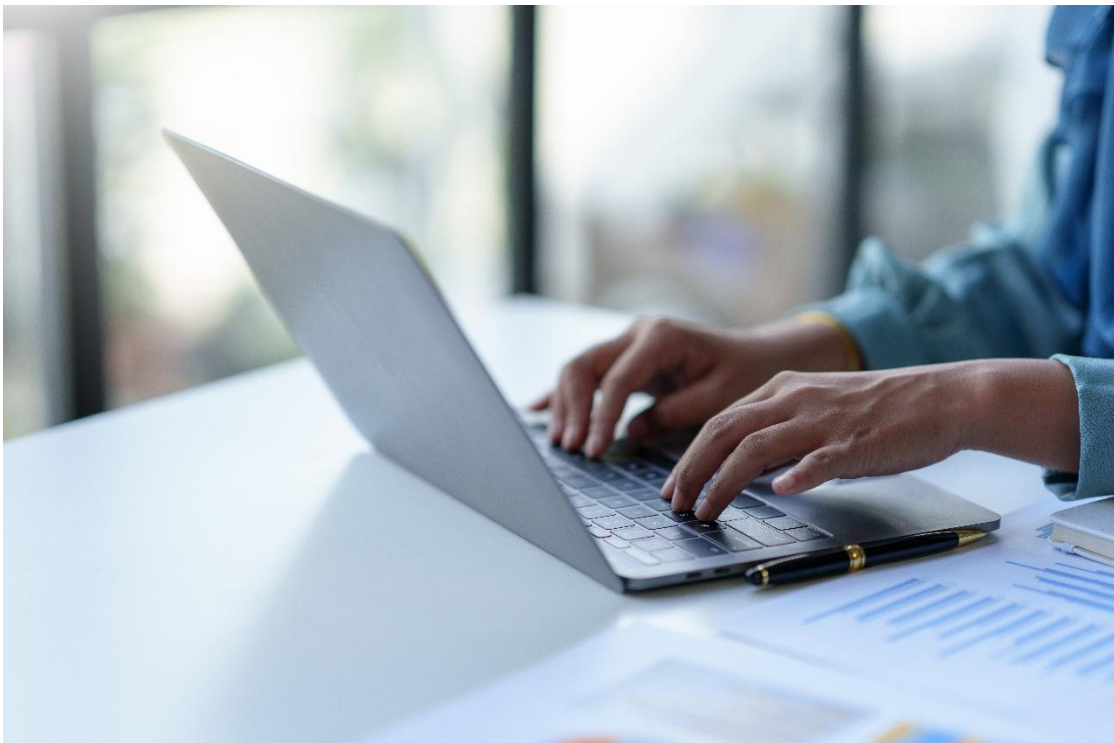
**Consider additional
resources and
support for your
school.**



Hazardous Waste Informational Resources

Efforts were made to compile relevant information as comprehensively as possible, however, this guidance may not detail every potential regulation that could apply depending on the unique circumstances of your school. School personnel are encouraged to review additional resources.

- SQGs and LQGs are subject to additional hazardous waste regulations not covered in this document. If you believe your school may be an SQG or LQG, please see PA DEP's [Information for Hazardous Waste Generators](#) and EPA's [Managing Your Waste: A Guide for Small Businesses](#).
- For general information about hazardous waste in Pennsylvania, please see PA DEP's [Hazardous Waste Program](#).
- For additional information about vape disposal for schools, please see Public Health Law Center's webinar, [What a Waste: Legally Disposing of E-Cigarettes and Nicotine Products](#), and EPA's [How to Safely Dispose of E-Cigarettes: Information for Schools and Small Businesses](#). Please note, however, that schools cannot dispose of hazardous waste through household hazardous waste collection sites in Pennsylvania.



How can we help your school?

In partnership with their contractors across Pennsylvania, the Division of Tobacco Prevention and Control at PA DOH offers school-based programs, services, and technical support to prevent and reduce student tobacco and nicotine use, including vaping. The division is also currently developing new programming to support schools with vape disposal. For more information about services available to your school, please contact the contractor in your region and copy RA-DHVaping@pa.gov.

DIVISION OF TOBACCO PREVENTION AND CONTROL REGIONAL PRIMARY CONTRACTORS

American Lung Association in Pennsylvania

Counties served: Adams, Bedford, Blair, Bradford, Carbon, Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lackawanna, Lebanon, Lehigh, Luzerne, Lycoming, Mifflin, Monroe, Montour, Northampton, Northumberland, Perry, Pike, Potter, Snyder, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Tioga, Union, Wayne, Wyoming, York

Contact: Chelsey Hildebrand at Chelsey.Hildebrand@lung.org

Health Promotion Council of Southeastern PA

Counties served: Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Lancaster, Montgomery, Schuylkill

Contact: Pamela Clarke at pclarke@phmc.org

Philadelphia Department of Public Health

Counties served: Philadelphia

Contact: Ryan Coffman at Ryan.coffman@phila.gov

Tobacco Free Adagio Health

Counties served: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Somerset, Washington, Westmoreland

Contact: Hannah Cristofano at hcristofano@adagiohealth.org

Tobacco Free Adagio Health

Counties served: Cameron, Clarion, Clearfield, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Forest, Jefferson, Lawrence, McKean, Mercer, Venango, Warren

Contact: Michael Fiorelli at mfiorelli@adagiohealth.org



Your feedback matters! This guide is intended to be a living document, and any insights or suggestions you may have to help the PA DOH improve content to better support your school is welcome. Are there resources, information, or support that would help your school implement the recommendations in this guide? Is there anything we can change to make the guide more helpful for your school? Do you have questions about the guide? Please contact RA-DHVVaping@pa.gov.

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