

WHAT'S IN THAT PUFF? THE TRUTH ABOUT DRUGS AND KPODS

22 NOVEMBER 2025, 9.00AM – 2.00PM

THE FOUNDRY

On 22 November 2025, 78 participants attended “What’s In That Puff? The Truth About Drugs and Kpods” organised by the National Youth Council (NYC) and Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), in partnership with the Ministry of Health (MOH), National Council Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) and Architects of Life (AOL).

The session was part of a year-long series of engagements organised by NYC and its partners to gather youth insights to develop the SG Youth Plan, a blueprint that aims to capture the ideas and aspirations of youths.

The session focused on educating youths about the illegality and health risks of vaping, including emerging threats like etomidate and Kpods, as well as available cessation resources such as the QuitVape programme and AOL workshops to build resilience and support others in overcoming addiction.

The session was moderated by MCCY’s DrugFreeSG Champion, Mr Devananthan s/o Tamilselvii and began with a dialogue with an expert panel on drug trends and rising abuse of etomidate and drug-laced vapes, followed by a Q&A session with the audience.

The expert panel consisted of:

- Dr Mak Chia Meng Charles, Senior Consultant, National Addictions Management Service (NAMS), Institute of Mental Health (IMH)
- Mr Nicholas Gabriel Lim, National Council Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) Council and Member, Head of Programme for Youth Work and Professional Life Coaching, Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS)
- Mr Goh Boon Siong, Lead Social Worker, Youth Guidance Outreach Services (YGOS)

This was followed by a fireside chat with Madam Rahayu Mahzam, Minister of State (MOS), Ministry of Digital Development and Information and Ministry of Health (MOH).

Dialogue with Expert Panel

Current drug use trends

The moderator asked the panel what were concerning drug trends today and how young people were accessing or using drugs.

- Mr Goh said that many youths often did not perceive drug use as risky. He said that exposure to peers who used drugs, coupled with word-of-mouth reassurance, contributed to this normalisation of drug use. Mr Goh said that changing their behaviour required connecting with youths before correcting them.
- Mr Lim said that he had observed a growing number of youths experimenting with drugs through vaping. He said that vaping often acted as a gateway to other drugs, and he was particularly concerned about the rising prevalence of vape use among youths in Singapore. He said that many youths underestimated the effects of vaping, even though nicotine and other substances could cause gradual and permanent changes to neural pathways. He stressed that early use made these changes more challenging to reverse, making early intervention crucial.

A participant asked (via Slido) which part of drug rehabilitation was most challenging.

- Dr Mak said that for individuals who abused etomidate, withdrawal symptoms were more psychological than physical. He said that the cases managed by NAMS tend to involve higher levels of clinical severity. He said some patients underwent a week-long detox programme before continuing their recovery at home, where managing underlying issues and daily triggers was particularly difficult. He said that skilled addiction counsellors and group therapy played important roles in recovery.
- Mr Goh said that when youths sought treatment, many feared that social workers would abandon them after case closure. He said the more difficult stage often came after formal intervention ended, when unresolved issues resurfaced and old peer influences re-emerged. He stressed the importance of building a trustworthy and stable support system.

Causes of drug use and vaping

The moderator asked the panel why youths turned to drugs and what motivated them to start.

- Mr Boon said the key was recognising the pain behind their behaviour. He said that disconnect, sadness, grief and loss often drove youths towards drugs. He said that adults should focus more on the underlying reasons for drug use and vaping, emphasising that unless adults connect with that deeper pain, youths had no reason to trust or listen to them.
- Mr Lim said such behaviour was driven by basic psychological needs such as love, belonging, fun, freedom, and survival. He said that when these needs were unmet, vaping or drug use could become an accessible way to meet them. For example, a lack of fun or stimulation could lead youths to vape for excitement, while feelings of misunderstanding at home could drive them toward peers who used substances. He said that identifying these unmet needs allowed adults to guide youths toward healthier alternatives.

- Dr Mak said that cases referred to IMH involved patients who had already attempted to stop using substances on their own or through community counselling but had been unsuccessful. He said that some presented in crises, including including psychiatric breakdowns or suicidal thoughts. He agreed that substance abuse was often a symptom of deeper underlying problems and noted that these patients tended to have biopsychosocial problems such as trauma from family violence, psychological disorders like depression, to emerging mental health conditions.

Health impacts of vaping and Kpods among youths

The moderator asked the panel what made vaping and the abuse of etomidate particularly dangerous for youths, and what were the long-term risks to their health.

- Dr Mak said that etomidate was an anesthetic agent intended for medical procedures and not a recreational drug like heroin or methamphetamine that worked on the dopamine pleasure system.
- Dr Mak said that long-term use posed risks such as adrenal insufficiency, which disrupted the body's hormonal balance. He said he frequently observed hypokalaemia (low potassium), which was dangerous because it affected heart function. He explained that low potassium levels could result in arrhythmias and other cardiac complications.

Cessation support and available resources

The moderator asked what platforms or programmes were available for youths seeking help and what conversations with them should look like.

- Dr Mak said that adults should approach these youths gently and avoid accusatory language. He said some youths could quit independently, while others required professional help to manage withdrawal. He highlighted counselling and support avenues such as the NCADA Advocacy Network, where youths could take an active role in promoting a drug-free Singapore in their schools and families, and tap on the DrugFreeSG Fund to link up with agencies and resources.
- Mr Goh said that moving youths from pre-contemplation, where youths did not recognise substance use as a problem, to contemplation, where they began to consider the impact and change, was difficult. He emphasised that adults should be knowledgeable, as youths might otherwise turn to unreliable sources for information

Fireside Chat with MOS Rahayu Mahzam

Dangers of vaping and Kpods

The moderator asked how the widespread use of vaping and Kpods, especially among youths, affected families and what were the wider social costs to society.

- MOS Rahayu said that vaping and Kpods imposed significant health, emotional and social cost on individuals, families and society. She cited examples such as the Megan Khung case to illustrate how substance abuse could lead to devastating consequences for families and lasting societal harm. She said Singapore prioritised its people and took a firm, evidence-based approach to protect public health and ensure a safe and conducive environment for Singaporeans, which was why the Government moved early to ban vaping and Kpods.

Government stance towards vaping and Kpods

The moderator asked what the government regulations were regarding vaping and Kpods, as well as the outcomes of those regulations.

- MOS Rahayu said different agencies had distinct roles in the efforts to tackle vaping, such as MOH and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on regulations, with the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) overseeing tobacco and vaping enforcement. She said that HSA held joint operations with the Singapore Police Force to enhance enforcement capacity, while schools enforced penalties, including disciplinary measures and parental notifications.
- She said the surge in etomidate use revealed gaps in the legislation, prompting MOH and MHA to temporarily classify etomidate under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

An on-site participant asked what the rationale was for being lenient to students who had owned up to owning vapes.

- MOS Rahayu said the government took a balanced and meaningful approach towards vaping and explained that the enforcement targeted systemic issues compassionately, distinguishing clearly between drug abusers who needed treatment and traffickers. She noted this approach aimed to encourage honesty and early intervention rather than punitive measures.

A participant asked (via Slido) why the government did not ban both cigarettes in addition to vapes, since both were harmful to one's health.

- MOS Rahayu said that if cigarettes were introduced today, they would likely have been banned. She said that cigarettes were unfortunately deeply entrenched in society and the government had in place comprehensive measures to counter the harms of cigarettes such as unattractive packaging, high taxes, minimum-age laws and spaces which were not smoke-friendly.

Actions youths can take to address vaping and Kpods

A on-site participant asked how society could break the cycle of self-harm driven by challenging environments, while continuing to enforce laws and engaging the public without ostracising those affected.

- MOS Rahayu said youths could contribute meaningfully by mentoring younger children and bring value to the community by changing habits and supporting their peers. She said small, proactive actions could create momentum and ripple effects in promoting healthy habits. She encouraged creating non-judgmental spaces that offered healthy alternatives and for youths to reach out to trusted adults or friends to seek guidance, rather than spiraling alone.