

TRI-STATE AREA

Vaping's Dangers Drive Teens to Try to Quit

Young people are seeking treatment, but doctors say public-health response is inadequate



The CDC says 33 people across the U.S. have died from vaping-related illnesses. PHOTO: TONY DEJAK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Melanie Grayce West

Updated Oct. 20, 2019 1:38 pm ET

Vaping-related illnesses and deaths have spurred more young people to seek help to quit, physicians and psychologists treating teenage users of e-cigarettes say, but few treatment options exist and there is rising concern that the public-health response for cessation programs is inadequate.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What can parents do to encourage teens to quit vaping? Join the conversation below.

Jonathan Avery, director of addiction psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medicine in Manhattan, said many teen e-cigarette users have been arriving at his hospital's emergency department in recent weeks with what they believe are complications from vaping.

In some cases, teens are catching early symptoms of vaping-related lung illnesses, he said, but in others, it is nothing medical—teens are afraid they might be sick.

These patients, and others, are now eagerly wanting to quit. Those who have stopped vaping are flooding his office with calls on how to maintain abstinence, he said.

“I don’t see so much the kids unwilling to quit at all. Now the kid and the parent are both on board with quitting,” Dr. Avery said. “What’s missing is a youth nicotine treatment center.”

RELATED ARTICLES

- [Four Northeastern Governors Team Up on Vaping and Marijuana Standards \(Oct. 17\)](#)
 - [Juul Halts Online Sales of Some Flavored E-Cigarettes \(Oct. 17\)](#)
 - [Lawmakers Pressed to Take Action on E-Cigarettes \(Oct. 16\)](#)
 - [Judge Blocks Michigan Ban on Flavored E-cigarettes \(Oct. 15\)](#)
 - [Congress Probes Bot-Generated Social-Media Messages About E-Cigarettes \(Oct. 14\)](#)
-

Earlier this month, state officials reported that a 17-year-old Bronx boy was the first vaping-related death in New York state. The city’s medical examiner is still determining the cause of death.

A survey released in September by the New York

City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene said that 1 in 15 city middle-school students had recently reported using an e-cigarette. One in 6 public-high-school students use e-cigarettes, the city has said.

A state effort to ban the sale of flavored e-cigarette products, which health officials say draw young people to vaping, is tied up in state court. A New York City Council bill proposed earlier this year that would ban menthol cigarettes and flavored e-cigarette products is awaiting a vote.

Gregory Conley, president of the American Vaping Association, an advocacy group, said that decades of studies on cigarette smoking show that nicotine can be a difficult habit to quit.

“Our advice to adults seeking to quit nicotine is to purchase a refillable vaping product and work their way down to using e-liquids that contain zero nicotine, but that they should only do so if they are confident that they will not relapse back to smoking,” he said. “It would be improper for us to give advice to those who are not old enough to purchase the products.”

Meanwhile, 33 people across the U.S. have died from vaping-related illnesses, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and nearly 1,500 have been sickened.

“We need such a massive response to what is happening,” said Thomas Ylioja, a tobacco-cessation expert at Denver’s National Jewish Health. That organization operates smoking-cessation programs in several states, including a teen-focused cessation program called My Life My Quit, which began in July.

In recent focus groups, he said, some teens reported that their vaping products malfunction at high altitude and instead don't vaporize liquid, but "spit globs of e-liquid in your mouth." Teens talked about "vape tongue," when you can no longer taste a flavor, while others reported getting so ill from nicotine that they vomited, he said. Those who want to quit vaping have considered moving to cigarettes, he added.

"I get the sense that we, as a public-health community, are way behind the curve in getting out in front of teens with accurate information," he said.

A patient of Melodi Pirzada, chief of pediatric pulmonology at NYU Winthrop Hospital on Long Island, started vaping over the summer and came to see Dr. Pirzada recently because, she said, she could "feel a difference" in her lungs.

The 19-year-old New Hyde Park woman, who attends college, is a singer and felt that her breaths weren't as deep since she started vaping. The woman said she began vaping over the summer because she wanted to try it.

"The whole generation is hooked on it," the young woman said.

She is using willpower and tapering usage of the device, she said, as well as using nicotine gum and nicotine patches, but "they don't do anything."

"I feel that once you start no matter what you do, it's hard to stop," the woman said. "Nobody knows how to quit."

Dr. Pirzada said the hospital has long offered smoking-cessation sessions for adults. But given the vaping epidemic among teens, "we're considering implementing similar teen-only programs to help teens stop vaping," she said. The hospital is also looking to do increased screening of teens.

Another tool, she said, is a law change that would permit physicians to prescribe nicotine patches or gum to teens. It is now illegal in New York for anyone under 18 years of age to buy such over-the-counter products.

Michael Steinberg, director of the Rutgers Tobacco Dependence Program in New Jersey, said the number of teens enrolling in his program has jumped dramatically in the past few weeks.

Historically, a handful come in over a year, he said, but 10 have come in over the past month and a half. In group therapy, he said, they are coached by much older adults to quit the habit now, with older smokers taking the younger people under their wing.

The youngest patient enrolled in one of his cessation programs, he said, was 12.

Write to Melanie Grayce West at melanie.west@wsj.com

