

Parents: It's time to talk to your kids about e-cigarettes

By Aaron Warnick

Keeping up with the latest thing isn't always easy. But if you're a parent or guardian and you're not up to speed on electronic cigarettes, you're a little late on your homework. You may have heard the word "vaping" without fully understanding what it means, but you can be sure your kids do.

Decades of science and education have dramatically reduced the number of people who smoke regular cigarettes, youth included. But e-cigarettes have done a lot of damage in the fight against addiction.

E-cigarettes are battery-powered devices that contain a mix of liquid chemicals, often containing nicotine and other harmful substances. The liquid, which is stored in a tank or disposable cartridge, is heated so it

turns into vapor. That vapor is breathed into the lungs and then exhaled, much like a cigarette.

Consumers need to be at least age 21 to buy e-cigarette products. Despite that, millions of children and teens still acquire and smoke them. Federal health leaders have called the problem a new epidemic, calling on parents and guardians to be the first line of defense.

"As much as they think their child is different, there is no way to predict which child or adolescent will begin trying, using e-cigarettes," says Albert Rizzo, MD, FACP, FCCP, chief medical officer at the American Lung Association.

Without the obvious warning signs of cigarette use, such as tobacco smells on clothing or cigarette lighters lying around, it can be hard to tell that your child is using e-cigarettes.

Rizzo says that parents should look for unusual or unfamiliar items that could be parts of e-cigarettes, such as coils, small empty cartridges, or USB stick-sized devices. Teens and kids who use e-cigarettes may show behavioral changes, mood swings and agitation as well as shortness of breath, or unexplained respiratory symptoms. Be alert for sweet fragrances, which can sometimes be a byproduct of flavored e-cigarettes.

Even if you don't have reason to suspect that your child is using e-cigarettes, you should talk to them about it. There are a lot of myths and misleading information about e-cigarettes spread by manufacturers.

Starting the conversation

Before you dive into a conversation with your kids, it's important to know some of the facts about e-cigarettes.

E-cigarettes are different from regular cigarettes in that they don't produce smoke, but the vapor they emit isn't just water. It contains addicting nicotine and harmful toxic chemicals, including carcinogens. E-cigarettes irritate the lungs when inhaled and pollute the air when exhaled.



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Most e-cigarettes contain nicotine, even when the label says nicotine-free, Rizzo says. Nicotine is highly addictive. And studies find that many e-cigarette users end up smoking combustible cigarettes too.

Despite a new look, cigarettes and e-cigarettes have a lot in common. But because e-cigarettes have been on the market for only about a decade, federal regulation is still behind.

As a parent or guardian, you play a huge role in preventing your child from picking up an addictive, harmful habit.

The first step is to educate yourself about e-cigarettes. Then talk to your child about them. Let them know that nicotine is addictive and harmful to their developing brains. Some e-cigarettes even contain cancer-causing ingredients like formaldehyde.

Tell your kids point blank that you don't want them to use e-cigarettes. Starting at a young age, give them clear, consistent messages and follow up with them as they get older.

If you're not sure how to begin the conversation, look for science-based guides from organizations such as the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and the American Lung Association.



E-cigarettes 101: How to spot them

Part of the challenge for parents in addressing e-cigarette use is that they don't know enough about the products. So here are a few tips.

E-cigarettes come in different shapes. Some look like a small cylinder, where one end is placed in the mouth, but they are also commonly rectangular, like a USB stick. Some are larger and shaped like a small box, about the shape of a flip-lighter, with a cylindrical mouthpiece. Many science-based organizations have images of e-cigarette products online so parents can learn to identify them.

An e-cigarette can be put away without being turned off, so you won't see it "extinguished" like a regular cigarette. That means if your child is using them, they may quickly move the device out of sight.

The terminology is also different, so it's possible to hear kids talking about e-cigarettes and not know it. When they mention words like vape, juice, carts, pens, liquids or tank, they may be talking about them.



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