



The Nation's Health Podcast transcript

S25, EP8 *E-cigs, pouches and teens: Why the tobacco fight isn't over*

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BRIAN KING: We know nicotine is highly addictive. It can harm the developing adolescent brain, but it can also prime the brain for addiction to other drugs.

SOPHIA MEADOR: *From the American Public Health Association, I'm Sophia Meador and this is The Nation's Health Podcast.*

Less than 30 years ago, over one-third of teens were still using tobacco. But today, that number is less than 8%.

Despite this huge public health victory, new products are flooding the market with slick marketing campaigns designed to hook young people. According to the 2024 National Youth Tobacco Survey, e-cigarettes are now the most popular tobacco product among teens, closely followed by nicotine pouches.

Even though public health has made great strides, there are still major hurdles ahead. To talk more about what's at stake, I'm joined by Brian King. He's the executive vice president for U.S. programs at the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. Brian also served as director of the FDA Office for Tobacco Products from 2022 to 2025.

Brian, thanks so much for joining us today.

The nation has witnessed a huge decrease in the rate of teens using tobacco products over the last 25 years. What sort of strategies and actions did public health take to help drive this decline?

Yes, so the declines in youth tobacco product use are a monumental public health win. We've been seeing those declines since the late 1990s. And the reason we've seen them is the implementation of evidence-based interventions that we know work. I like to call it the tobacco control vaccine — things like increasing the price of products, smoke-free laws and health education campaigns to educate the public about the health risks of these products, particularly among kids. The combination of all those factors has helped drive down youth use rates.

Then, tobacco products like e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches are becoming the go-to choice for many young people. How have these products managed to appeal so strongly to a younger audience?

So we've really seen a shift in the way tobacco products have been marketed over the years.

You know, in the early days, in the '60s and '70s, they were advertised on TV, and then that was banned in 1971. And then the industry started advertising billboards and through promotion of events, and then that was banned in 1998.

And more recently, we've seen a shift to the point of sale, particularly, you know, retail stores, but also importantly, social media and gaming platforms. And we know this is an area of particular concern, because kids are likely to use those platforms.

But regardless of how we've seen industry evolve over the years, it's those same themes and tactics — including independence, rebellion, sex — all of those themes that we know resonate with kids.

Then what concerns do you have about products like e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches?

So we do know that e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches generally have lower risks than cigarettes, but that doesn't mean that there's no risks. It's also not difficult to be safer than a cigarette because they have 7,000 chemicals and 70 carcinogens.

But when it comes to these newer products like e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches, they all contain nicotine, which is uniquely harmful for kids. We know nicotine is highly addictive. It can harm the developing adolescent brain, but it can also prime the brain for addiction to other drugs. And it's part of the brain that's responsible for learning, attention and memories. So all things that are very important for kids to be fully functioning.

But it's not just the nicotine. We know e-cigarettes have also been found to include other harmful ingredients, including heavy metals, volatile organic compounds and small particles that can be inhaled deep into the lungs.

Do you see any difference in how the current administration is making tobacco products more accessible?

At present, we're largely seeing a continuation of the overarching themes from the last administration — continuing work to review pre-market applications for tobacco products, which is required by law as well as enforcement.

And on the enforcement, we've seen continued work at the border, including by (U.S.) Customs and Border Protection as well as new operations by the Department of Justice to seize illegal products. But ultimately on the enforcement front, a comprehensive approach is key across the supply chain,

including against manufacturers, distributors, importers, retailers — all those entities that are promoting these products. And an all-government approach is also key, including multiple agencies in this space. And that's not just FDA, but also what you've seen recently, Customs and Border Protection, also Department of Justice, the U.S. Postal Service and others.

Now, on the other end of the spectrum, on the application front, there have been some authorizations by this administration. But I will say that that's a function of FDA getting through the application. So when it comes to e-cigarettes, there was nearly 27 million applications and they've now resolved over 26 million.

And so although it may seem like there's more authorizations lately, that's largely different by the fact that the agency has reviewed most of what they've received and the ones that are left are the higher-quality ones that require more extensive review and also have a higher likelihood of authorization because they include the necessary science to meet that bar that Congress requires. And that scientific bar is really important, and it's critical the administration continues to follow that standard and weighs the risks and benefits of these products in making an authorization and that includes weighing the risks of these products to vulnerable populations like kids.

With more tobacco products hitting the market, how do you think this could impact the rate of youth tobacco use moving forward?

Well, when it comes to these products, that, the characteristics are largely the same. But one thing we've seen change over time is the efficiency with which they deliver nicotine. And so this can be beneficial for an adult smoker if they want to transition to a lower-risk alternative and that would have to be one of those FDA-authorized varieties that have gone through rigorous scientific review.

But there's also concern, because greater nicotine efficiency can also lead to greater nicotine dependence and addiction among populations like youth and young adults. And so as we've seen the exterior of these products get sleeker and more appealing, we've also seen the nicotine efficiency delivery increase as well and that's a particular concern in the context of youth initiation.

What's your current outlook on youth tobacco use? And do you think we're still headed in the right direction?

I'll say the trends are currently headed in the right direction. We're at a 2- year low for tobacco product use. E-cigarette use in particular has declined 70% over the past five years, reaching the lowest level recorded in a decade. So that's a monumental public health win.

But we've still got 2.25 million kids using tobacco products in this country, with e-cigarettes being the most common. And despite the overall decline, we've also seen a slight uptick in certain products, particularly nicotine pouches. And so that's a good reminder to us that we need to continue to implement those interventions that we know work and apply to the diversity of tobacco products.

But we also can't rest on our laurels. We've got to continue to keep the pedal to the metal and we don't want to play a game of public health whack-a-mole where some products are going up and others are going down. We want all forms of tobacco product use to be headed in the downward direction when it comes to kids.

What more can public health workers do to ensure that this decline in youth tobacco use continues?

So, it comes down to two things: regulate and educate.

When it comes to regulations, there's efforts at the national level by FDA and others, but it's important to note that the Tobacco Control Act that gives FDA authority doesn't preempt states and communities from acting. That said, there's many things that can be done from a policy perspective, including price increases, smoke-free policies, policies to address youth-appealing flavors and others — and that's happening across the country.

And then on the education front, everybody plays a role. And here, prevention is key. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. And it's important that we educate youth about the risks of these products, including through mass-reach health communication campaigns as well as targeted community-based efforts. But it's also important that the education be evidence based and we deliver in ways that will best reach youth where they are. So that's an important in a variety of different arenas.

And we also have to be mindful of cessation as well. We've got over 2 million kids who are using these products and that's why in the clinical setting we've got to screen for these products. And importantly, get kids access to resources.

Thank you so much to Brian King for speaking with us today. For more, visit www.tobaccofreekids.org.