

CLEARING THE HAZE

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We keep hearing about the “new generation’s epidemic:” vaping and the culture surrounding it. This phenomenon has spread across the U.S. and infiltrated teen habits.

Many companies advertise e-cigarettes as a safer alternative to smoking cigarettes, marketing them to smokers trying to quit. Some research suggests that e-cigarettes may cause less harm for those who already smoke cigarettes. However, this does not mean that e-cigarettes are safe or that they do not come with a host of other health complications.

An FDA report published Nov. 15 revealed that from 2017 to 2018, vaping increased by 78 percent among high school students and 48 percent among middle school students, reversing a trend of decreasing rates of youth smoking and derailing recent efforts to combat nicotine consumption.

E-cigarettes contain a liquid that is heated up by a device called an atomizer to create a vapor. The person using the device then inhales this vapor, which usually contains nicotine, flavoring and other chemicals, many of which can harm users’ health. The liquid form allows fast delivery to the bloodstream and has an immediate effect.

Nicotine is a highly addictive substance, especially for youth whose brains have not yet matured.

Studies have linked smoking during adolescence to increased risk of psychiatric and personality disorders in adulthood, including abnormalities in the growth of the prefrontal cortex, according to the National Center for

Biotechnology Information. Additionally, teens who smoke e-cigarettes are more likely to begin smoking cigarettes than teens who did not.

Despite the risk of addiction and other health consequences, many teens still vape. One reason is a misconception about what they are smoking and the possible effects of those substances. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, roughly 28 percent of seniors in high school reported having smoked e-cigarettes in the past year. However, over half of them, when asked about the contents of the e-cigarette, responded that they thought it contained only flavoring. The study found this figure to be even higher for those in grade 10 and grade eight.

“Vaping is the hottest topic, especially in America. A lot of teenagers are involved in it,” junior Kirtan Shah said. “It impacts not only our culture, but it affects our health. People don’t always vape because they want to vape, they want to let people know they vape.”

Vaping websites capitalize on this social perception by touting vaping as a communal bond. Because adolescent brains do not fully mature until they reach their 20s, peer influence more easily sways teens’ decision-making process.

The issue is twofold: the peer pressure component leads susceptible youth to try vaping, then the addictive habit hooks them. “[Youth] think it’s cool and that it makes them look better. They start vaping because of peer pressure, so if we tackle that it will solve a lot of issues,” sophomore Nikolas Kluver said.

On Sept. 12, FDA commissioner Scott Gottlieb released a statement critical of Juul and four other e-cigarette companies. The FDA’s toughened stance comes in response to new data regarding vaping trends in teens, which Gottlieb has called an “epidemic” that spawns future addictions to nicotine.

Juul announced Nov. 9 it would stop selling many the majority of its flavors in brick-and-mortar stores, leaving only menthol and tobacco-flavored products. All flavors are still available online where a system of age-verification can prevent underage users from purchasing products.

Less than a week after Juul’s announcement, the FDA declared it would seek a nationwide ban on menthol in cigarettes, a popular minty compound that soothes throat irritation caused by smoking, making it more addictive.

The new trend has shown some similarities to the original cigarette era before cigarettes gained a negative cultural association because of their health impact. Vaping has spread relatively quickly since the popularization of e-cigarettes, but the long-term implications of vape culture and its prevalence in society remain to be seen.



(Graphics/Bella Ramirez)

