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Guest column: E-cigarette craze hurting our children in Clatsop County

By Sheila Roley 2 hrs ago



A woman exhales while vaping from a Juul pen e-cigarette in Vancouver, Wash. Schools have been wrestling with how to balance discipline with treatment in their response to the soaring numbers of vaping students.

AP Photo/Craig Mitchelldyer

We have a dangerous new problem raging in our school buildings and campuses in Clatsop County.

Clatsop County Public Health officials and local school administrators recently investigated reports of the alarming growth in e-cigarettes, or vape devices brought to school by students in schools around our county.

What they found was shocking — frequent vaping instances in the classroom, reports of students selling “hits” of vape, and a greater degree of occurrences at all high schools and middle schools than previously experienced. We’ve even heard from families of elementary school students that they’re fielding questions about vaping from their 10-year-olds.

The sheer volume and rate of growth of youth e-cigarette and related nicotine product use infects every part of our county, our state and the country. U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar recently said, “We have never seen use of any substance by America’s young people rise this rapidly, this is an unprecedented challenge.”

In Clatsop County, the percentage of 11th-graders using e-cigarettes has more than doubled from 2015 to 2017 — from 9% to 20%, according to the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey.

Nicotine consumption through inhalant delivery systems — capable of delivering the equivalent of a pack of 20 cigarettes in a single cartridge — puts our youth at a greater risk for lifelong addiction and serious health risks due to the ultrafine particles, including heavy metals and carcinogens, being inhaled deeply into the lungs.

State studies show nearly half of the 11th graders who smoke started with e-cigarettes and then switched to cigarettes. Half of all 11th graders believe getting e-cigarettes is easy, even though the legal age to purchase them in Oregon is 21.

What makes matters even worse is the misconception that vaping is safer than smoking. E-cigarettes are officially marketed to adults as a “safer alternative” to smoking. However, there is not one peer-reviewed study that supports this claim.

These products are aimed squarely at our youth, with kid-friendly flavors and brightly colored packaging. In a recent retailer assessment completed by our county and the state of Oregon,

82% of Clatsop County tobacco retailers offered e-cigarette products with fruit and sweet flavors appealing to kids. This is alarming, given that four out of five underage smokers begin with a flavored tobacco product.

We can address this disturbing trend. Our communities need to adopt a licensing system to help educate retailers and enforce the laws that protect our youth from getting access to these harmful products. Our school districts are committing to increase the proactive education about, and response to, e-cigarettes and other emerging nicotine delivery systems.

We must work as a community to help protect our youth. To learn more, contact Clatsop County Public Health at 503-325-8500.

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