

Parents, Teens, and Vaping

The list of stresses on parents continues to grow. Added to concerns that already include school shootings, harmful online content, and bullying, parents now have to contend with the dangers of vaping. As you have likely heard, there have been hundreds of recent cases of severe lung disease in teens and young adults in the U.S. due to currently unexplained toxic reactions to vaping. At least two of those cases have happened in our region.

Pediatricians and other health professionals have been increasingly concerned about the harms of vaping. We know that the nicotine addiction caused by vaping is just as powerful as the addiction caused by cigarettes. Over the past decade, researchers have found that teen addiction due to nicotine leaves the developing adolescent brain more susceptible to other drug addictions, including opioids and methamphetamine.

There is also strong evidence that the chemicals in vape products cause long-term lung damage. What is not fully understood, is which specific chemicals in vaping “juice” are most responsible, and how quickly vapers will develop chronic lung disease.

This recent outbreak of vaping-related illness is a reminder that there are also short-term risks. At least one person has died and many others have required Intensive Care Unit treatment, often leaving teens and young adults with permanent lung damage. The exact chemicals that are causing these life-threatening illnesses remain under investigation.

What is indisputable is the enormous increase in vaping in children as young as 8 and 9 years old. This is fueled by thousands of flavors that mimic candy and other products that are specifically marketed to children and teens. Roughly half of high schoolers have tried vaping, and a new generation is becoming addicted to nicotine. Equally worrisome is that vape devices can be used to inhale an almost any drug. Many of the recently hospitalized teens and young adults reported marijuana extracts were added to their vape juice.

As parents, we realize that we can't protect our children from everything. But there are steps we can take to help our kids make better decisions. As the school year begins, they will be faced with new situations and new social pressures. This includes opportunities to vape.

Take some time at the dinner table, or any place that you are comfortable, to have a discussion. Talk to them in a way that comes across not as a lecture, but as someone who understands that the more good information they have, the better choices they can make. Let them know that you understand that everyone wants to fit in, but that doesn't mean they need to put things in their bodies (alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, pills, etc.) that leave them vulnerable to harm from addiction, overdose, sexual assault, and both short- and long-term damage to their bodies.

Being a parent is a very tough job, and that job isn't getting any easier. We can't put our children in bubbles. At some point, they need to make decisions for themselves. What we can do is remind them how much they mean to us and provide them with knowledge that prepares them to choose what's best for them, instead of making impulsive choices aimed at impressing peers. For more information, you can visit the Calvert County Health Department's website. We hope you and your family have a safe and healthy school year.