

Experts warn vaping can be gateway to smoking for teenagers

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CANTON TOWNSHIP, Mich. - E-cigarettes are thought to be an option to help people stop smoking, but for teenagers, experts warn vaping can be a gateway into picking up the smoking habit.

Vaping involved putting liquid into the chamber of a device that heats the liquid and turns it into a vapor, which a person then inhales.

"There is a perception that it's safer than smoking, that it's OK for kids to do and it's really not," said Cheryl Phillips, a program coordinator for St. Joseph Mercy Health System.

Phillips was speaking at a Vaping 101 event at Canton High School. The program was put on by St. Joseph Mercy Health System and Plymouth-Canton Community Schools to help educate parents and students about vaping.

Phillips said one of the biggest issues with vaping is the nicotine.

"The earlier the brain gets introduced to it, the more addictive it can be, so we can have a nicotine-addicted person at 13 or 14 years old if they start vaping," Phillips said.

She said even vape juices that claim to be nicotine-free often tend to have traces of nicotine in them because the substance is not regulated.

"Right now, the manufacturing of vape juice is not regulated," Phillips said. "You don't know what you're getting and you don't know what's actually in it. There's no requirement at this very second for a label to be on it for what's in it."

"Just like it used to be they were smoking in the bathroom, now they are vaping in the bathroom or after school," said Dr. Brian Primack, of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Researchers at the school studied 2,000 teens and young adults, starting at the age of 18, for a period of 18 months. Over that time, they found 50 percent of the young adults who vaped went on to smoke tobacco cigarettes.

"This is very concerning because we are talking about a big population of people who normally would probably not move on to start smoking cigarettes," Primack said.

He said the results suggest that e-cigarettes could be a gateway to tobacco, in addition to other health risks, such as lung disease and, possibly, cancer.

"When someone's inhaling off of a vape, they're inhaling anti-freeze," Primack said. "They're also inhaling benzene, which is in car exhaust."

Phillips said more research is currently being done to find the full range of effects from vaping and just how dangerous it can be.

"We don't know, in five, 10 years from now, what the effects will actually be," Phillips said.

She said there are no major warning signs a teenager is vaping but parents can look out for a fruity or candylike smell, because vape juice comes in many flavors. She also said to look for eye dropper bottles, which are what vape juice come in.

Vaping devices come in all shapes and sizes, making them hard to spot.

"In general, they look like normal, everyday smoking items but now they look like anything and everything," Phillips said. "They look like batteries. They look like phones. They look like pens. They look like toys. They look like USB ports."

Phillips said side effects including high blood pressure, insomnia, stroke, irregular heartbeat, wheezing, shortness of breath, lung inflammation, upset stomach, headache, dizziness, fainting, nervousness and agitation have all been linked to vaping.

"I've walked in on kids vaping in the bathroom, sometimes in the back of class, and I just think, 'Well they're gonna hurt themselves and their body when they grow up,'" Frederick Dunford, a Canton High School freshman told Local 4 after listening to Phillips presentation.

Dunford and other teens were in the audience to get the message firsthand: Stay away from vaping.

Scott Austin recommends parents talk to their children about vaping.

"Talk to your kids. Don't be afraid to talk to them about it. Don't be embarrassed," Austin said. "If you're not talking to your kids, you can bring them to something like this, where someone else is doing the education for you."

Phillips said parents should have an honest and open conversation about vaping with their children. She said parents should talk to them about the potential health risks associated with it and why they think it is dangerous.

Researchers said it's important for parents to become familiar with vaping terms and brands, such as JUUL, Vuse and MarkTen, and to start talking to children in elementary school about potential health risks, since some of the liquids may be appealing to children.