

Gasping for air: An American epidemic

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On Aug. 23, the first death linked to vaping was reported in Illinois. As of Oct. 15, there have been a disquieting 33 deaths across the country, including one in Mississippi.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported 1,479 people with confirmed lung injuries tied to the use of e-cigarette products, a number that has risen exponentially in only weeks. Most of the victims are men, at a median age of 24.

Patients can experience symptoms such as coughing, chest pain, shortness of breath, fatigue, vomiting and fever. While some cases may be related to vaping THC, the central cause of the illnesses continues to elude officials. The CDC claims chemical exposure is suspected to be at the core of these cases. However, finding exactly what patients could have been exposed to is no simple feat.

According to cdc.gov, "E-cigarettes work by heating a liquid to produce an aerosol that users inhale into their lungs." Along with nicotine, users can consume an abundance of harmful substances while vaping, such as lead and cancer-causing chemicals. Toxic chemicals and metals have also been found in many e-cigarettes.

With the upsurge of health concerns, many now fear for the plethora of teens and young adults that vaping has attracted in the past few years. Yale Medicine states that more than 3.6 million middle and high school students currently vape.

Ethan Max, a former Center Hill High School student, has had his own experience of addiction to vaping.

"I'd have a bad cough," Max said. "I'd have trouble breathing. It might relieve a bit of stress, but it hurts your body."

Max was up front about another consequence of vaping, which earned him multiple in-school suspensions last spring when, as a junior, he was caught vaping at school.

"I got ALC twice," he said.

The student handbook, which includes the DeSoto County Schools Code of Discipline, identifies vaping as a Level II offense. Disciplinary actions range from ALC to school suspension.



Illustration by Lacey Buckley

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"Vaping is one of several items that fall under the Code of Discipline 2-4," Assistant Principal Brenda Case said. "We are always concerned for our students' well being and this is one of those issues that is detrimental to students. It is also illegal for most of our student population and is clearly against DCS Board Policy. Due to all of these reasons, we have to be aware of this issue and address it when it occurs."

Case said vaping is a relatively new problem at CHHS.

"I don't have the exact date, but it has certainly been within the last two to three years," she said.

In that time, several devices have been confiscated, Case said, also noting that the appearance of vaping devices has changed over the years.

"Vaping devices have certainly changed from a bulkier style to ones that are more sleek and less noticeable," she said. "I remember when they began making them to look like thumb drives a while back."

There has been a meteoric rise of vaping among teens, despite vaping being presented as a healthier alternative to traditional cigarettes. Outrage has sparked over the idea that e-cigarette companies could have purposefully marketed to younger audiences by introducing flavors inspired by candy or fruit.

In September, Kevin Burns stepped down as CEO of Juul amid the vaping controversy. Juul commands more than 70 percent of the vaping market. When asked by CNBC what he would say to a parent of a child addicted to his product, Burns said, "It's not intended for them. I hope there was nothing that we did that made it appealing for them. As a parent of a 16-year-old, I'm sorry for them."

On Oct. 17, Juul announced it would suspend online sales of its non-tobacco, non-menthol flavored e-cigarettes in the U.S. Juul's mango, creme, fruit and cucumber flavors had already been removed from retail stores.

The CDC has blatantly stated that vaping is unsafe for children, teens, and even young adults. Most e-cigarettes contain nicotine, which is highly addictive and harms adolescent brain development.

In all attempts to stop the popularity of vaping among teens, a clear solution has still evaded the public. School administrators have attempted strict policies to discourage vaping, like immediate suspension. Others promote the education of the dangers of e-cigarettes to urge students to quit. Cory Uselton, Superintendent of DeSoto County Schools, echoed the concerns.

"I agree that vaping is an alarming trend among youth and adults as well," Uselton said. "Because vaping is becoming more prevalent in society, it is very possible that school districts around the country could alter policies in upcoming years. The Level II designation in board policy on a local level is set by our school board members, and they evaluate their policies on a yearly basis. Regarding the possible intended marketing to young people and the inherent dangers of vaping, it is very possible that state legislators and national leaders will put more regulations on this industry."

The Trump administration already wants to remove all flavored e-cigarettes from the market. The CDC continues to warn about the dangers of vaping, and many hope that simply bringing awareness to how many have been hospitalized due to vaping complications could bring someone to quit.

Max, who said he has given up vaping, advises against starting in the first place.

"People need to realize it's only bad for you," he said. "Plenty have already died from it."