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**Teens Are Smoking Less, Vaping More**

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Here’s some encouraging health news that’s been overshadowed, understandably, by the relentlessness of COVID-19 and its many variants. In 2020, only 2.3% of high school students in NYS smoked cigarettes, compared to 27.1% in the year 2000. That’s a 91% decrease over 20 years, and it has important implications. First, it confirms that basic tobacco prevention policies are effective in changing both social norms and individual behavior choices. Second, it means that as this generation ages, there will also be fewer adult smokers. Less tobacco-related illness and a reduction in both economic costs and the toll of human suffering will inevitably follow. By any measure, this is all good, but it is not the whole story.

Sometime in the last 5 years or so, it started to become clear that the culture of teen smoking was being replaced by a culture of teen vaping, a technology not even marketed in this country until 2007. The latest numbers from the NYS Health Department bear this out. While the smoking rate for high school students trends steadily downward from 2000, the annual dips get bigger starting in 2014, not coincidently the same year that vaping rates began to spike upward. From there on, the numbers for each go sharply in opposite directions. E-cigarette use doubled, from 10.5% to 20.6%, in the span of just two years between 2014 and 2016. By 2018, when the “Juul” effect was in full swing, 27.4% of high school students were vaping. (This is particularly ironic given that it is almost identical to the percentage of high school students who were smoking in 2000.) In 2019 the U.S Surgeon General declared teen vaping an epidemic.

These vaping trajectories are changing the landscape of tobacco prevention and raising new concerns that have implications for public health policy. Here are some of them:

* E-liquids liquids can contain nicotine in far stronger concentrations than is found in combustible cigarettes, exposing teens to greater risk. In addition to being addictive, nicotine causes changes in the way synapses are formed in the developing brain that can affect attention, learning, mood and impulse control and may increase risk of addiction to other drugs. High doses of nicotine can also cause physical symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, racing heart, sweating, and anxiety. As yet, there are no restrictions on the amount of nicotine e-liquids can contain.
* The hi-tech look, feel and delivery of vaping devices is a huge attraction to teens. Compact design makes them easy to conceal and to use on the sly, a major problem for schools. Cannabis and other drugs can also be used in some vaping devices. Two local school districts have called us recently to request help in educating teachers, parents and students and for assistance in finding more effective ways of dealing with students caught in violation. One told us that two teens from the district needed hospital level care after vaping TCH extract. Schools need help on a larger scale to deal with problems caused by vaping.
* A troubling report from the Truth Initiative cites multiple studies showing that a majority of teens who vape are using it to cope with anxiety and depression, which were at high levels even before the pandemic. Unfortunately, nicotine can exacerbate these feelings, and make mental distress harder to treat. Young people need easier access to mental health services.
* Regulation and enforcement are struggling to keep up with vaping technology and distribution. For example, Puff Bar, a teen favorite, uses synthetic nicotine to avoid being included in the definition of flavored products subject to FDA authority. NYS banned the sale of flavored e-cigarettes and e-liquids in 2020, but disposable flavored brands have been found for sale in several local stores as well as in almost every county around the state.

The well-intentioned people who invented and first promoted the e-cigarette as a safer way for adults to consume nicotine hated tobacco companies and wanted to put them out of business because of their long history of lies and deception. It’s a cruel irony that now, as the pipeline of “replacement” smokers is drying up, Big Tobacco is setting out to take over the vaping industry by acquiring or developing their own e-cigarette brands. We should celebrate the decline of the combustion cigarette and continue to work for its complete demise, but make no mistake, the story will not end there.

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*The Healthcare Consortium is a local charitable organization with a mission of improving access to healthcare and supporting the health and well-being of the residents in our rural community. The agency is located at 325 Columbia St. in Hudson. For more information: visit www.columbiahealthnet.org or call 518-822-8820.*