



THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKEOUT: TACKLING THE VAPING EPIDEMIC IN SCHOOLS

A CSCH Brief by Daniel Schwartzman

Expanding the Great American Smokeout

Every third Thursday of November the American Cancer Society organizes an event titled “The Great American Smokeout,” to encourage individuals that smoke cigarettes to quit and start the road to recovery. The first Smokeout was held in 1976 by the California division of the American Cancer Society and nearly one million people quit smoking for the day.¹ Although the campaign has served a role in the reduction of cigarette smokers, recently a new public health threat has been gaining traction—particularly among adolescents: the flavored e-cigarette device. It is estimated that in 2019, 4.1 million high school students and 1.2 million middle school students currently use e-cigarettes.² Across 33 states, there are over 450 confirmed and possible cases of severe lung disease linked to vaping, including several deaths. As of October 2019, 299 reported lung injury cases have been associated with the use of e-cigarettes.³ The FDA has deemed e-cigarettes an epidemic. We recommend that smoking prevention efforts include e-cigarette and vape devices in their scope by expanding efforts through The Great American Smokeout and other public health campaigns.

Vaping and E-Cigarettes

E-cigarettes are electronic devices that produce an aerosol, usually containing nicotine, by heating a liquid. Most devices include a battery, a container for the liquid and a heating element to produce the aerosol. Users inhale e-cigarette aerosol into their lungs, a process colloquially known as “vaping,” and bystanders can also breathe in this aerosol when the user exhales.³ E-cigarettes are marketed as a “safe” alternative to cigarettes and other tobacco products. Their popularity has spiked in recent years with users being attracted by the fruity flavors and colorful packaging.⁴ However, e-cigarette aerosol is not harmless water vapor. It can contain many potentially dangerous substances besides nicotine such as: ultrafine particles that can be inhaled deep into the lungs; flavorings such as diacetyl; volatile organic compounds; cancer causing chemicals; and heavy metals such as nickel, tin and lead.⁵ The FDA noted that these devices are not safe and their misleading packaging stimulates usage. Nicotine can harm the parts of the brain that control attention, learning, mood and impulse control.⁶ The American Cancer Society strongly recommends that children, teens and young adults never begin using e-cigarettes or start vaping.⁷ The long-term effects are also relatively unknown, with the alarming increase in lung problems among users a troubling sign. According to the CDC, patients have reported symptoms that started slowly, such as shortness of breath, coughing and chest pain with some patients reporting more severe problems such as vomiting, diarrhea, stomach problems and fatigue.⁸

Enhancing School-Based Health Education with the Great American Smokeout

In light of the recent findings and increase in related health problems associated with vaping and e-cigarettes, public health professionals have begun campaigns to emphasize the dangers of using these devices. The Great American Smokeout provides a unique opportunity to “change the trajectory of this epidemic”, and could be an initial step in combatting e-cigarette use.⁴ Educating youth about the dangers of vaping and changing the belief that e-cigarettes are “safe” is critical as a first step in prevention. Including vaping as a part of the Great American Smokeout can reinforce school-based prevention efforts, and can enhance community involvement in collaborative efforts to stigmatize the usage of e-cigarette devices. Resources are available that can be useful in school-based efforts, and are aligned with the mission of the Great American Smokeout. See the table below for some examples by target audience.

In addition to efforts that are part of the Great American Smokeout campaign, it is important that the school community be considered a critical setting in which this epidemic can be addressed. Educating caregivers and teachers on the various devices available (e.g. they can look like usb flash drives or other acceptable academic devices) is a first step in increasing awareness. Hosting professional learning sessions on vaping dangers, how to spot vaping, and how to integrate information into the health education curriculum are additional steps to a comprehensive plan.⁹ For educational policy makers, yet another step involves review and update of school policy around tobacco and drug use to include vaping devices.

Resources for Schools, Health Care Providers and Families

Audience			Resource Name and Description
Families	Schools	Healthcare Providers	
✓	✓	✓	CDC Toolkit for parents, health care professionals and educators that contains many useful fact sheets, courses of action, and additional links to resources that could be used in schools or at home.
✓	✓	✓	Surgeon General Collection of Resources for parents, healthcare providers, teachers and administrators to use when discussing e-cigarette. Contains printed materials, audio/visual media, and a full report by the surgeon general regarding the epidemic.
	✓		Massachusetts Department of Public Health Resource List includes materials for administrators, teachers, counselors and school health services, with useful handouts, educational materials for staff and a links to other resources.

¹ Great American Smokeout. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.cancer.org/healthy/stay-away-from-tobacco/great-american-smokeout.html>

² Cullen, K. A., Gentzke, A. S., Sawdey, M. D., Chang, J. T., Anic, G. M., Wang, T. W., ... King, B. A. (2019). e-Cigarette Use Among Youth in the United States, 2019. *Jama*. doi: 10.1001/jama.2019.18387

³ CDC Warns Against Vaping During Lung Illness Investigation. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.cancer.org/latest-news/cdc-and-fda-investigate-lung-illnesses-linked-to-vaping.html>

⁴ Shields, P. (2018, October 30). Call to end vaping: include e-cigarettes in Great American Smokeout. Retrieved from <https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/413767-call-to-end-vaping-include-e-cigarettes-in-great-american-smokeout>

⁵ Report: Vaping Up, Smoking Down Among Teens. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.cancer.org/latest-news/report-vaping-up-smoking-down-among-teens.html>

⁶ E-cigarettes Quick Facts. (2019, June 17). Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/bam/e-cigarettes_quick_facts.htm

⁷ American Cancer Society Warns About Risks of Vaping for Youth. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.cancer.org/latest-news/american-cancer-society-warns-about-risks-of-vaping-for-youth.html>

⁸ Outbreak of Lung Injury Associated with E-Cigarette Use, or Vaping. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/basic_information/e-cigarettes/severe-lung-disease.html