

### **Health Director warns of vaping dangers, offers help with policies**

Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced 805 cases of lung injury reported in people with a history of e-cigarette product use or vaping. The cases come from 46 states and 1 U.S. territory. Seventeen deaths were confirmed in more than 10 states.

The CDC also gave summary information about 373 of these cases for which age and sex information was available: Approximately 2 in every 5 cases (38%) are in people 21 years or younger. Nearly three fourths (72%) of cases are male.

This week we learned of the first reported Nebraska death associated with e-cigarettes or vaping. I'm concerned we could end up with cases here in our South Heartland counties, too.

#### **Are kids using vaping products here?**

We know from local surveys that our teens in Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties have tried electronic vaping devices and that use of vaping devices by youth has increased alarmingly in the last 5 years (comparison of 2014 and 2018 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Reports).

When asked if they have ever used an electronic vapor product, 45% of 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders said yes. This percent was less for 9<sup>th</sup> graders (31%) than for 12<sup>th</sup> graders (53%), but is alarming at all four grade levels.

When asked about how often they used it, nearly one-third (30%) of 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders reported using an electronic vapor product on one or more days of the last 30 days. The percent is lower in 9<sup>th</sup> graders and higher in 12<sup>th</sup> graders and the overall rate has increased from less than a quarter (23%) reported in 2014.

Furthermore, the percentage of students who reported using an electronic vapor product very frequently during the past month (20 or more days) more than doubled in five years (from 3% in 2014 to 7% in 2018).

#### **What is the issue?**

More than five years ago, in May 2014, the Board of Health for South Heartland District Health Department passed a resolution recommending policy changes to prohibit the use of electronic cigarettes in public places. With this resolution, the Board encouraged city and county governments, schools, and employers in the four-county district to add electronic cigarettes to their policies that already prohibited tobacco use.

At that time, we were concerned that the use of electronic cigarettes modeled the risky behavior of smoking and gave the message that such products were safe. In addition, we questioned the long-term effects of using vapor products. In a news release from May 2014, I stated: "The research on safety is lacking – we don't know the long-term effects of inhaling nicotine, nor do we know for sure what else is being emitted in the vapor."

Fast forward. Tobacco companies have stepped up their marketing of electronic vapor products and other tobacco products by adding flavors. According to the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), "manufacturers have introduced thousands of flavored tobacco products to the market in recent years, including e-cigarettes with flavors such as gummy bear, cotton candy and

peanut butter cup and cigars with flavors such as watermelon, lemonade and cherry dynamite. As of 2017, researchers had identified more than 15,500 unique e-cigarette flavors available online. Between 2008 and 2015, the number of unique cigar flavor names more than doubled, from 108 to 250.”

NACCHO reports that “Flavors are a primary reason why youth are using e-cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products. Flavors alter the taste and reduce the harshness of tobacco products, making them more appealing to young people and easier for them to use. Youth often start using tobacco products with a flavored product and report that they use tobacco products ‘because they come in flavors I like.’”

### **Take Action!**

Now, with the recent reports of lung injuries and deaths in people who have a history of using electronic vapor products, it is time for governments, schools, employers and community organizations to take action, if they haven’t already.

What can you do? Add language to your existing tobacco policy that prohibits use of electronic vapor devices. If you need assistance, South Heartland District Health Department can help you by sharing example policies, including the one our Board of Health adopted in 2014.

What else can you do?

- Take care of yourself and model healthy behaviors for our children: don’t use tobacco and don’t use electronic vapor devices, particularly those containing THC.
- You can contact the health department or your healthcare provider if you or someone you care about would like some help quitting nicotine-containing products (cigarettes, chew, or e-cigarettes, or other tobacco products). There are resources available.
- Participate in local, state and national civics – learn about the issues and share your opinion with decision makers. For example, find out what tobacco and electronic vapor product policies are in place at your worksite or your local school and how they are enforced.
- Learn about the “Stopping Appealing Flavors in E-Cigarettes for Kids Act (SAFE Kids Act)”, introduced by Senator Dick Durbin and Senator Lisa Murkowski (S. 655) and Representative Diana DeGette and Representative Jamie Raskin (H.R. 1498), then tell your senator or congressman what you think.

Our South Heartland communities identified Substance Misuse as a priority health issue, including tobacco and electronic vaping products, alcohol, illicit drugs and prescription medications. Together, our communities determined prevention strategies to include in our 6-year Community Health Improvement Plan. Please join us in addressing this pressing health concern. Find out how by contacting me at the health department. Together, we can reduce substance misuse and risky use to protect the health, safety and quality of life for our children and for all!

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