**Health**

**The latest "flash drive" trend for teens is likely concealing nicotine**

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A selection of the popular Juul brand vaping supplies on display in the window of a vaping store in New York in March 2018. Photo: Richard B. Levine/Sipa USA/TNS

By Kaiser Health News, adapted by Newsela staff

Published:04/12/2018

Word Count:1065

Recommended for:Middle School - High School

Text Level:8

The students wait eagerly for their teachers to turn their backs.

That’s their cue to reach quietly for a small, sleek device they can easily conceal in their palms. It resembles a flash drive, but instead of computer files, this device stores nicotine. Nicotine is the addictive chemical in tobacco.

They take a hit, sucking on the device as they would a cigarette. Then, “they blow into their backpacks … or into their sweater when the teacher isn’t looking,” said Elijah Luna, age 16, a sophomore at Vista del Lago High School, which is about 30 miles east of Sacramento, California.

The vapor cloud is so small and **dissipates** so quickly that teachers are usually none the wiser, said Luna, who added he has never tried it himself.

The device is a Juul, a popular electronic cigarette that’s a sensation among teens, especially in wealthier neighborhoods. It has become a nightmare for school administrators and public health **advocates**.

“I think this is going to be the health problem of the decade,” said Milagros Vascones-Gatski, a substance abuse counselor at Yorktown High School in Arlington, Virginia. In nearly 17 years working with teens, she said, she has never seen a tobacco product become so popular so quickly. Three to four students are caught smoking e-cigarettes, usually Juuls, on campus each week, and some are suspended, she said.

**"Pods" Are High In Nicotine**

Vascones-Gatski, along with other concerned educators and health care experts, considers “Juuling” more than youthful rebellion. Because it is high in nicotine, they fear the devices are extremely addictive for this **vulnerable** population.

To combat the spread of the devices, some schools have banned flash drives as well. They want to avoid confusion between the items. Yorktown High even removed the main entrance doors from student bathrooms at the beginning of the school year to curb students from vaping inside. Despite these efforts, teens across America continue using the stuff in class, in hallways, in restrooms and at school sports.

Because it’s referred to as Juuling, not smoking or vaping, some students may think it's harmless, said Pamela Ling, a professor at the University of California-San Francisco School of Medicine. “They may not even know it contains nicotine.”

It does have a significant amount of nicotine. One Juul “pod,” the nicotine cartridge inserted into the smoking device and heated, delivers about 200 puffs. This is about as much nicotine as a pack of cigarettes, according to the product website.

Assuming a teen smokes one pod a week, “in five weeks, that’s like 100 cigarettes,” Ling said. “By that point, you’re considered an established smoker.”

**Devices Meant For Adults, But Attract Youth Buyers**

E-cigarettes, also known as vapes, are battery-operated devices that heat up liquid nicotine, then users inhale the nicotine in the form of vapor. Smoking e-cigs is more secretive and easier to get away with than traditional cigarettes.

In 2016, California increased the minimum age to buy tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, from 18 to 21. Experts predicted the change would make it harder for teens to get tobacco products from their slightly older friends. This seems to be working, according to a recent report.

However, some health care professionals now worry that devices like the Juul could reverse that progress.

Although its manufacturer, Juul Labs, said the device is exclusively for adult use, it is appealing to youths for several reasons. It can be easily charged on a laptop, its decal covers come in colorful designs, and the pods are available in flavors such as mint and crème brûlée.

The odor Juuls produce could easily be mistaken for a lotion or body spray.

**Sales Are Not So Easily Controlled**

Juul Labs said it wants to help schools get its products off their campuses. Spokeswoman Christine Castro said the company has created lessons to educate youth about Juul and nicotine addiction, with input from academics. It is available for any interested school, she said.

“This product is solely for adult smokers,” Castro said. “We absolutely condemn kids using our products.”

Castro said the company limits online purchases to people age 21 or older. To browse the site, you need only click on a box pledging you are of age. To buy it, you must create a profile. Customer information is verified through multiple databases and, if that fails, customers must upload a photo **identification**, she said.

However, Castro admitted it is harder to control sales on sites like eBay or Craigslist.

She urged people to report suspicious sales to the company’s youthprevention@juul.com email address. Juul Labs may also follow up with secret shopper visits to stores suspected of selling to underage customers, she said.

If users get through the age-verification process online, they can buy a Juul starter kit, which includes the vaping pen and four pods, for $50. That’s expensive for most high school students — which is why Juuling might be more common in wealthy communities. “In order to vape, you need money,” said Vascones-Gatski, noting most students at her high school either work or receive big allowances.

**Looking To The FDA To Step In**

Vince Willmore, vice president of communications at the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, applauds efforts taken by schools, but he thinks the burden should not fall solely on educators and parents. The Food and Drug Administration “regulates tobacco products … and we think it’s important that the FDA take action to protect kids from Juul and other e-cigarettes,” he said.

Last year, the FDA delayed regulations that could have yanked many e-cigarette products from the market, possibly including the Juul. The FDA is studying whether these devices might actually help longtime smokers quit traditional cigarettes. “That basically locked in the products that are in the market for another four years,” Willmore said.

Meanwhile, schools continue the battle.

At Needham High School in Massachusetts, Principal Aaron Sicotte said e-cigarettes started appearing on his campus last school year, and soon Juul became the most popular brand.

The school has alerted staff “so that when these fall out of students’ bags, teachers don’t hand them back,” he said.

While the **hype** surrounding Juul might die down, Sicotte does not expect vaping to go away. “I think this is something that will remain in the fabric of adolescence,” he said. “The access is too easy, the draw is too great, and the push through advertising is too significant.”