

New trends in vaping alarm educators and parents

By Marion Callahan

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Community and school leaders are seeing a dramatic rise in vaping trends among teens, who are using hard-to-detect “juuling” devices to inhale flavored juices, nicotine and, in some cases, highly concentrated marijuana. A study, released in early March, shows cancer-causing toxins are found in teens who vape.

“It’s just flavored juice,” said one 10th-grader.

“It’s easy to hide,” said a ninth-grader.

“Could be worse,” some parents say.

Yet vaping and the latest inhaling trend, “Juuling,” are raising concerns among parents and school officials who are trying to alert the community to potential hazards and the latest “stealthy” devices that look more like a pen, flash drive or computer mouse than an inhaling tool.

The most recent state survey on students’ risky behavior — the 2015 Pennsylvania Youth Survey — shows that 11 percent of students have “vaped” in the last 30 days, up from just under 2 percent in 2011. Educators report that students are vaping — ingesting favored chemicals, nicotine or marijuana — in bathrooms, the back of classrooms, hallways and other public locations. Much of their use goes undetected because many of the devices do not emit an odor or smoke like a cigarette.

“It’s one of the biggest concerns that every high school in America is dealing with right now,” said William Tennent High School Principal Dennis Best, who is part of a consortium of regional school administrators. “Sometimes kids don’t even know what they are ingesting.”

Central Bucks School District is hosting an information session on “Adolescent Vape Trends” on April 10, similar to a presentation that Centennial School District, of which Tennent is a part, hosted in February. Vaping also was the primary topic of recent parent-teacher meetings in Pennsbury School District and the subject of district-wide letter circulated to parents in the Palisades School District.

The Upper Dublin School District in Montgomery County banned all USB flash drives after learning the students were charging their “Juuls” in school laptops.

Small enough to conceal in the palm of a hand, some vaping devices can deliver fluid laced with flavors, oils, chemicals, nicotine and even marijuana. Gaining in popularity is the “Juil,” a USB shaped e-cigarette. Like other vaping devices, it is battery-powered and converts liquid into an aerosol, which users inhale. The battery needed to heat the fluid on these devices can be charged through a USB port on a computer.

Central Bucks West’s head school nurse, Carol Klein, said many students said they are buying the devices and oils online. And they don’t come cheap, she said. A vaping pen cost one student \$75, and he balked when she handed it over to security.

Responses from parents on the trend “run the gamut,” Klein said. In a few cases, parents are buying the devices for their teens because “they see it as less harmful than smoking cigarettes,” she said.

“Other parents are appalled and want to know what the schools are doing about it.”

In some districts, including Central Bucks and Centennial, students get fined \$50 and their devices are confiscated on the first infraction, the same penalty imposed if caught with tobacco products. Klein found one Juuling pod in her office and turned it in to school security officials, who had discovered eight devices in one week.

Klein and other educators say students are also using these devices to “dab” — vaping a hash oil concentrate or wax that can be mixed with flavored oils. One worry, Klein said, is that some students have seen other students “ghost inhaling” the substances, meaning they are holding the smoke in and swallowing it instead of exhaling.

“They don’t know what these chemicals are doing to their bodies, and the biggest challenge is not being able to detect an odor or a smoke,” Klein said. “We are educating our staff and trying to stay one step ahead of them, but it is happening and their use is increasing.”

One Bucks County 10th-grader told this news organization his friends use it for “the buzz” or “flavoring.”

While most vaping oils do not have the level of nicotine found in cigarettes, the “drug free” chemicals still can be harmful to the body, recent studies now show. And even a small amount of nicotine found in some of the oils can be addictive.

“Studies are showing that with youth who start with the devices using the nicotine juices, the movement to cigarettes is more likely to occur,” David Fialko, certified prevention specialist and educator from the The Council of Southeast Pennsylvania.

He said even small traces of nicotine could affect teens’ behavior, concentration, memory and their ability to learn.

A study released earlier this month and published in the journal Pediatrics reported that the flavorings — especially the fruit flavorings — in vaping juices contain several toxins, including the known carcinogen acrylonitrile. Researchers found that teens who used e-cigarettes, especially with the fruit-flavored juices, had up to three times greater amounts of certain toxins in their urine than teens who never vape, the researchers found.

Another University of Southern California study linked e-cigarette and vaping use to an increased prevalence of bronchial illnesses and asthma.

Fialko, who works on education programs with schools in the region, said teen users, and even some parents, defend the product, though the legal age to purchase tobacco and vaping products is 18 in Pennsylvania and 21 in New

Jersey.

“Some parents are buying it because they don’t see the harm in it and say it’s better than smoking,” said Fialko, adding that vaping was introduced years ago with the intention of helping people stop smoking. “We are not telling them that if they are ‘juuling’ they’ll be part of a larger drug problem in society, but it’s not healthy.”

Fialko warned that not enough is known about the long-term effects of vaping, but added that studies do show that vaping increases the risks of becoming a smoker. He also said the products don’t produce a vapor, but rather emit an aerosol.

Many teens are attracted to the candy-flavored “juices” and the packaging, he said. Social media isn’t helping, as many teens go online to view tutorials and learn smoking “tricks” that users show off.

A random online search for flavors showed selections such as Mama’s Hot Chocolate, Unicorn Poop, Boo Berry, Strawberry Shortcake Ice-cream, Very Berry Slushie and, in a bubblegum-themed package, Joosylicious. One web site says vaping tricks are a way to “boost your cool” at a party.

Best, of William Tennent, said the items are clearly marketed to younger ages.

“Teens see it as something that doesn’t look like something that would hurt you,” he said. “And they’re wrong.”

Jennifer Polinchock, assistant superintendent of Centennial, and Central Bucks’ Klein both suggested that parents and schools educate children about the dangers of vaping or Juuling, along with other drugs and alcohol.

“We do know that students are experimenting at a much younger age, and we have to do our best to stop behaviors before they start,” Polinchock said.