

Montana students need facts on vaping

By Alli Kieckbusch

With the school year under way, the e-cigarette epidemic is still on the rise. Nearly half of Montana high school students having tried e-cigarettes. More than 25% of our youth currently are vaping, risking serious health consequences. It's important that we encourage our students to make healthier choices.

A common misconception about e-cigarettes is that the output is water vapor. When users exhale, they're actually breathing out an aerosol that contains cancer-causing chemicals and flavoring that is linked to lung disease.

A person's brain is not fully developed until age 25. Tobacco products and vape products contain nicotine, a highly addictive chemical, which has negative effects on brain development. For example, tobacco products, including vape products, increase the risk of mood disorders like depression, attention deficit and learning difficulties, according to the American Lung Association. One vape pod may contain as much nicotine as a whole pack of cigarettes.

Young brains are also more susceptible to long-term addiction. Someone under age 25 is more likely to get hooked on e-cigarettes faster and longer than someone older. Tobacco companies market their nicotine-laden products with flavors and fun colors to keep teens and young adults buying.

Teens who use e-cigarettes are four times more likely to start smoking cigarettes. Nicotine may prime the brain for addiction to other drugs in the future. This school year, let's encourage healthy alternatives to vaping.

Middle school and high school are big years in children's lives. Teens are trying to establish their identities and independence while balancing schoolwork and extra-curriculars. Students might turn to tobacco-related products for anxiety relief. Teens do get stressed. An e-cigarette or nicotine pouch might reduce these anxious feelings for a minute or two, but they can become far worse over time.

Parents, grandparents and other trusted adults need to talk to tweens and teens about healthy ways to handle stress and anxiety. The seven proven ways to reduce anxiety are:

1. Movement
2. Physical affection
3. Creative expression
4. Meditation
5. Laughter
6. Crying
7. Social connection

Encourage students to find coping mechanisms other than vaping. Joining a sports team or a school club would provide movement or social connection. Finding a hobby like drawing or playing an instrument can fill the creative expression bucket.

Students who take part in school sports might not realize the effect that vaping has on their athletic performance. Using e-cigarettes increases blood pressure and narrows arteries. Athletes who vape will have a harder time breathing due to a decreased lung capacity, which increases heart attack risk.

E-cigarettes and other tobacco-related products are commonly found in our schools. Students caught with these items suffer the penalties. As an alternative to in-school suspension, school administrators may refer students to the RiverStone Health INDEPTH program (Intervention for Nicotine Dependence: Education, Prevention, Tobacco and Health). This program is an opportunity to educate youth on the health effects and long-term consequences of using e-cigarettes. INDEPTH aims to let students assess their own product use and make better decisions.

Keeping youth informed and educated about what they're putting in their bodies can reduce the popularity of vaping.

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