

Education empowers teens to reject vaping

By Hillary Schafer

Why do you vape?

When Billings students answer that question, I often hear that they use e-cigarettes to relieve stress or anxiety. In fact, the key ingredient in vape products is nicotine – a highly addictive chemical that actually increases stress on the teen’s body. Nicotine makes the heart beat faster.

Part of my job at RiverStone Health is educating Billings middle school and high school students who were caught vaping in school. Our InDepth class is a partnership with local schools to provide education that empowers teens to make healthy decisions.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nicotine use in adolescence:

- Can harm brain development, which continues until about age 25.
- Can impact attention, learning, mood and impulse control.
- May increase risk for future addiction to other drugs, including smoking regular cigarettes.

Another reason teens start vaping is that friends and family vape and either encourage or enable the teen to join them. Just as parents, siblings and other relatives can influence youth to use electronic cigarettes, family members can persuade their teens to avoid vaping.

The Billings Gazette recently published a guest opinion signed by more than 40 Montana school principals who asked parents to talk to their children about the harm that nicotine and vaping can do to their brains and lungs. According to Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Montana high school students are more likely to vape than students in all but one other state. The most current survey indicates that 48% of Montana high school students have tried vaping and that 26% are vaping currently.

“These highly addictive products come in flavors especially attractive to kids,” the principals wrote. “Flavors like cotton candy, mango pineapple ice, skittles and blue raspberry are hooking our kids and impacting their lives physically, mentally, socially, emotionally and financially.”

In our InDepth class, we talk about healthy ways for teens to handle stress and anxiety like taking a walk or listening to music. We offer resources for quitting vaping, including the state My Life My Quit website (mt.mylifemyquit.org). My Life My Quit is free, confidential and specifically designed for youth.

Our InDepth class discusses marketing tactics tobacco companies use to make their products attractive to teens. We talk about the false notion that vaping is safer than smoking. Vapes contain more nicotine than a pack of 20 cigarettes. We teach that it is not a harmless water vapor they are inhaling, it is actually an aerosol. This aerosol contains many cancer causing chemicals including formaldehyde. Big Tobacco covers it up with sweet flavors to get them hooked!

The tobacco and vape industry spends more than \$30 million a year to market their products in Montana. The cost of Montanans' health problems caused by tobacco adds up to an estimated \$511 million annually.

Vaping is relatively new, so the health effects of using for years aren't well researched yet. Cigarette smoking continued to be extremely popular for generations before its lethal effects were fully documented and widely understood.

RiverStone Health joins Montana school principals in urging parents to talk to their kids about the harmful effects of vaping. What parents, grandparents and guardians say really does matter. You can influence your teens to make healthy choices.

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