



Contact: Dave Brendsel, david.brendsel@state.co.us, 303-692-2156

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Colorado youth vaping nicotine at twice the national average

Colorado youth are vaping nicotine at twice the national average and at the highest rate of 37 states surveyed, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A separate, more comprehensive state survey shows about half of Colorado high school students have tried vaping nicotine, don't see it as risky and think vaping products are easy to get, even though it is illegal to purchase them as minors.

"Vaping has replaced cigarettes as a way for underaged youth to use nicotine," said Dr. Larry Wolk, executive director and chief medical officer of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. "Too many of our young people don't realize the health risks involved."

While smoking cigarettes among high school students has dropped, vaping nicotine continues to increase. According to the 2017 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, only 7 percent of high school students currently smoke cigarettes, while 27 percent said they vape nicotine. The statewide school survey shows 87 percent of Colorado high school students think cigarette smoking is risky, but only 50 percent think those risks apply to vaping nicotine.

Research shows both smoking and vaping can be harmful to youth. More than 90 percent of vaping products, when tested, were found to contain nicotine. Nicotine has a negative effect on adolescent brain development, causing lasting cognitive and behavioral impairments, including effects on working memory and attention. Studies have shown that vape products can contain dangerous toxins, including heavy metals and chemicals known to cause cancer and other diseases.

Studies also show vaping is a predictor of future cigarette smoking. A study of 12th grade-students who had never smoked a cigarette found those who reported recent vaping were nearly five times (4.78) more likely to take up smoking one year later.

The health department has launched a statewide public education campaign to help parents and other trusted adults, such as teachers, coaches and counselors, talk to youth about vaping. The campaign's comprehensive TobaccoFreeCo.org site contains free materials, including tips on starting the conversation and a Vaping 101 fact sheet. It also includes information meant to destroy the myth that vaping is safe and raise awareness about the health risks of using nicotine.

"Research has shown us that young people benefit from conversations with their parents and other trusted adults," said Wolk. "Fact-based conversations can be very productive, and actually change teens' minds about the risks of vaping."