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The Hidden Dangers of Youth Vaping

E-cigarettes are the most commonly used tobacco product among youth in the United States. Many young people believe that vaping is a safer alternative to smoking traditional cigarettes. However, this is a dangerous misconception. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), no tobacco product, including e-cigarettes, is safe, especially for children, teens, and young adults.

E-cigarettes, often called vapes, are battery-powered devices that heat a liquid to create an aerosol, commonly referred to as vapor. Users inhale this aerosol into their lungs. Most e-cigarettes contain nicotine along with other potentially harmful substances, including flavoring chemicals. The amount of nicotine can vary widely, and some cartridges contain as much nicotine as an entire pack of cigarettes.

Although these products are marketed under a variety of names and flavors, they are far from harmless. E-cigarettes are highly addictive and contain chemicals that can negatively affect the brain, lungs, and heart.

Health Effects of Vaping

Vaping poses significant risks to young people because their brains are still developing. Nicotine can interfere with areas of the brain responsible for attention, learning, mood, and impulse control. Research has shown that adolescents who use e-cigarettes are at greater risk of developing nicotine dependence and are more likely to use other tobacco products, including traditional cigarettes, later in life.

The health risks extend beyond addiction. Regular use of e-cigarettes has been linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease. Some studies suggest that daily e-cigarette use may significantly increase the likelihood of experiencing a heart attack. In addition, vaping exposes users to harmful chemicals that may contribute to cancer and other long-term health problems.

Young people who vape are also more likely to experience respiratory symptoms such as coughing, wheezing, and worsening asthma. Vaping can damage lung tissue and impair lung function. One chemical of concern is diacetyl, which is used to create buttery or sweet flavors in some vaping products. Diacetyl has been linked to bronchiolitis obliterans, commonly known as “popcorn lung.” This serious and irreversible lung disease causes inflammation and scarring of the small airways in the lungs, leading to breathing difficulties and reduced lung function.

Nicotine Addiction and Quitting

With repeated use of vaping products, the brain becomes dependent on nicotine. Over time, individuals may feel they need to vape simply to feel normal. Signs of nicotine addiction include strong cravings, an inability to stop using the product, and the development of tolerance, meaning more nicotine is needed to achieve the same effect.

Nicotine addiction can negatively affect relationships with family and friends, interfere with school performance, and impact mental health. Quitting can be challenging, and many youth experience withdrawal symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and mood changes.

Young people are more likely to quit successfully when they have support from parents, family members, healthcare providers, and other trusted adults. Free resources are available to help youth stop vaping, including www.teen.smokefree.gov and www.ks.mylifemyquit.org. Families can also talk with their healthcare provider about additional support and treatment options.

Vaping may seem harmless, but the health risks are real. Understanding the dangers of e-cigarettes can help young people make informed decisions and protect their long-term health.

References: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Purdue University Extension; K-State Extension.