Health Risks Associated with e-Cigarettes and Marketing to Youth

Teddy Toro

California State University Dominguez Hills

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Instructor's Name

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The United States is currently facing a public health crisis due to electronic cigarette use among young adults. Electronic cigarettes, commonly known as e-cigarettes or vape pens, are small devices that heat flavored nicotine or THC, along with other chemicals and flavors. Although you must be 18 years or older to legally purchase e-cigarettes, companies market their products on social media and YouTube and feature flavors like "Thing Mints" and "Tootsie Rolls" that explicitly appeal to kids (Truth Initiative, 2018). A recent survey from Monitoring the Future reported that 37.3 percent of 12th graders had vaped in the past year (Johnston et al., 2016). JUUL, one of the most common brands of e-cigarettes, is known to be popular among young adults and teens. However, the Food and Drug Administration issued a warning letter to the company earlier this year for misleading claims about the safety of their products and appealing to a young audience (Kaplan & Richtel, 2019). E-cigarettes have been shown to damage brain cells (Zahedi et al., 2019), which is especially harmful if your brain is still developing. Not only can vaping damage brain cells, but they can also cause lung injuries. There have been 18 deaths and many more lung injuries associated with vaping products, and 21% of affected patients are 18 to 20 years old (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). One possible cause for this outbreak of lung injuries is unregulated additives in e-cigarettes. A 2013 study of nanoparticles in e-cigarettes found high concentrations of heavy metals and silicates from devices that can be inhaled along with nicotine vapor (Williams et al., 2013). As branding for e-cigarettes have shifted over time from being a tool to stop smoking to emphasizing consumer choice and flavors, government regulations should limit the sale of flavored e-cigarettes that appeal to young and new smokers (Zhu et al., 2014).

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