

E-cigarette sparks attention as FDA crackdown looms

March 20 2009, By Ken McLaughlin

The young man in the tall swivel chair at the mall seems lost in nicotine nirvana as he takes a deep drag on a cigarette and blows smoke rings to the surprise of passing shoppers.

Sarah Kruberg, a 21-year-old college student from Portola Valley, Calif., does a double take but keeps walking.

"I knew it couldn't be someone smoking a cigarette," she said with a laugh. "But I didn't know what it was."

What Kruberg saw at Westfield Valley Fair mall in Santa Clara, Calif., was a kiosk salesman puffing away on an electronic cigarette, a new product that Jose Canseco, the steroid-tainted baseball slugger turned e-cigarette pitchman, predicts will "revolutionize the industry of smoking."

Health officials worldwide, however, are casting a wary eye.

Last summer a Florida company began aggressively marketing e-cigarettes _ which emit a nicotine vapor with the help of a computer chip _ but the U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#) now seems poised to pull e-cigs from the market because the agency considers them "new drugs." That means they need approval from the FDA, which requires companies to back up their claims with scientific data.

"It is illegal to sell or market them, and the FDA is looking into this," said Rita Chappelle, an agency spokeswoman.

Asked if that meant the FDA would crack down on the dozens of mall kiosks nationwide where the product is being sold like perfume and cellphone covers, Chappelle said: "This is an open case. Beyond that I cannot comment."

Informed of the FDA's position, David Burke, general manager at Westfield Valley Fair, said Monday that the shopping center is looking into the legality of the product. "All our retailers are required to comply with applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations," he said.

Invented in China several years ago, the e-cig not only "smokes" like a cigarette. It also looks like a cigarette, feels like a cigarette, glows like a cigarette and contains nicotine like a cigarette.

But it's not a cigarette. It's a slender stainless-steel tube.

When someone puffs on an e-cigarette, a computer-aided sensor activates a heating element that vaporizes a solution -- usually containing nicotine -- in the mouthpiece. The resulting mist -- which comes in flavors such as chocolate and cherry -- can be inhaled. A light-emitting diode on the tip of the e-cigarette simulates the glow of burning tobacco. The device is powered by a rechargeable lithium battery.

Its boosters say it's the perfect way to quit smoking because the nicotine mist contains no tar or any of the host of cancer-causing agents of tobacco smoke -- yet has the touch and feel of smoking. That, they say, makes the e-cigarette superior to other nicotine-delivery systems such as patches, chewing gum, aerosol sprays and inhalers.

The levels of nicotine can be adjusted, from "high" to no nicotine at all. That, e-cig supporters say, allows smokers to wean themselves from nicotine, which most doctors say is highly addictive but not, as far as they know, a carcinogen.

The product's aficionados say that because it contains no tobacco, it can be used in bars, nightclubs, restaurants and other public places where states and localities have banned tobacco use.

But anti-smoking groups say that's exactly the problem. They fear that it will reintroduce a "smoking culture" into places where people no longer are used to seeing wisps of smoke and cigarettes hanging from people's mouths.

"I understand why people use the nicotine replacement aids," said Serena Chen, regional tobacco policy director of the American Lung Association in California. "But I don't understand why people want to pretend that they're smoking."

Chen believes that many ex-smokers will conclude that the e-cigarette is harmless and be lured back into the smoking trap.

"If you had a serial killer who liked to stab people, would you give him a rubber knife?" asked Chen. "This just boggles the mind."

Executives at Smoking Everywhere, the Sunrise, Fla., firm that is marketing the product on the Internet and in mall kiosks, say criticism of the e-cigarette is irrational.

"The mist is mostly water. It has to be better for you than smoking," said Eitan Peer, vice president of the company. "It's been approved by doctors. We've been on Fox News. We've been on the 'Howard Stern Show.' Our spokesmen are Jose Canseco and Danny Bonaduce."

Company officials say the other main ingredient in the e-cig is propylene glycol, which is used in everything from Hollywood smoke machines to food colorings to hydraulic fluids.

Peer said the suggested retail price of the Chinese-made e-cig is \$149, but because the kiosk operators are independent vendors, the price varies.

The other day, Dan Conroy picked up his e-cigarette "starter kit" from one of the two Smoking Everywhere kiosks at Valley Fair for \$140, plus tax.

"It's the first time I've seen the product," said Conroy, 37, a Sacramento, Calif., contractor. "But I'm interested in quitting, and this has to be healthier than tobacco."

He and several other smokers interviewed at the mall agreed that e-smoke isn't as satisfying or rich as tobacco smoke. But they all said they thought they could get used to it.

"It tastes pretty good," said Oliver De La Cruz, 29, of Daly City, Calif., whose wife, Kristine, was about to give birth to their first child. She encouraged him to try the e-cig, saying it would be a wonderful present to their newborn if Daddy would quit smoking.

But both De La Cruz and one nicotine-addicted friend, 23-year-old Marco Maneru of Daly City, said they wanted to do some research on the e-cigarette before they buy one.

"Who knows?" Maneru said. "There could be some chemicals in there that are really bad for you."

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