

US lawmakers grill e-cigarette makers

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Credit: TheNorlo/Wikipedia

US senators ripped at electronic cigarette makers Wednesday for their aggressive marketing campaigns to lure youths that have drawn parallels to those once used by Big Tobacco.

E-cigarettes, a tar-free alternative that release nicotine in a vapor instead of smoke and contain fewer toxins, are booming in the United States, with a market estimated at \$1 billion last year.

Lawmakers and health professionals, however, have expressed growing concern that the gadget's use and often unrestricted promotion could glamorize an addictive habit and hook non-smoking teenagers on nicotine.

"While major e-cigarette companies reiterate that they only target adults, a large youth audience still appears to be getting their message pretty loudly and pretty clearly," said Democratic Senator John Rockefeller.

That's true "particularly when they aim the message at TV and magazines and social media and events which just really come down hard toward kids," he added.

The increased alarm comes with greater usage of the devices, with the percentage of middle and [high school students](#) who used e-cigarettes more than doubling between 2011 and 2012, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And children aged 12 to 17 were exposed 256 percent more to e-cigarette television ads between 2011 and 2013, according to an analysis published early this month in the *Journal of Pediatrics*.

That means an audience of about 24 million kids is targeted by companies selling vaporized nicotine products.

Pediatricians "are seriously concerned that e-cigarettes may lead adolescents to a lifetime of nicotine addiction and could serve as a gateway to traditional cigarettes," said Susanne Tanski, who chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics' Tobacco Consortium.

Flavors, marketing targeting kids

With flavors bearing names such as Cherry Crush, Chocolate Treat,

Peachy Keen or Vanilla Dreams, "how can you sit here and say you're not marketing to children?" asked Senator Barbara Boxer, a Democrat.

But the two e-cigarette makers questioned by the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee insisted they were not targeting youths.

Jason Healy, president of blu eCigs—a division of number three US tobacco maker Lorillard—said his company only advertised to audiences composed at least 85 percent of adults.

"E-cigs have a tremendous untapped potential to positively change the lives of adult smokers of traditional cigarettes," he said.

NJOY president Craig Weiss said he backed proposals to ban all nicotine products to minors but called for more advertising to promote e-cigarettes to adults so they can learn about alternatives to traditional tobacco products.

An independent company, NJOY says it has no ties to the tobacco industry.

Tanski, however, compared [e-cigarette](#) marketing to ads used in previous decades by Big Tobacco, complete with celebrities, models and event sponsoring.

She said it would be a "tragedy" to skip a chance to regulate the devices' usage to protect children.

In April, the Food and Drug Administration proposed a rule that would for the first time extend the agency's authority over [tobacco](#) to cover products such as e-cigarettes, and ban their sale to minors.

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