

Surgeon general: 'Desperate need of clarity' on e-cigarettes

January 27 2015, by Michael Felberbaum

Public health officials are "in desperate need of clarity" on electronic cigarettes to help guide policies, the nation's newly appointed surgeon general said Tuesday.

Dr. Vivek Murthy, whose predecessors have been instrumental in guiding [tobacco control](#), addressed the battery-powered devices that heat liquid nicotine during a stop in Richmond as part of a cross-country listening tour. The U.S. Senate confirmed the 37-year-old physician and Harvard Medical School instructor's nomination as the country's senior public [health](#) official in December.

"There've been theories and ideas around the fact that [e-cigarettes](#) may be helpful from a harm reduction perspective in helping people who are already on cigarettes (that) have had trouble quitting actually get off cigarettes," Murthy said. "If the data indeed bears that out, then I think we should absolutely embrace that and use e-cigarettes in targeted ways."

However, Murthy expressed worry regarding e-cigarettes because he said there are many unanswered questions about their health impacts, specifically their contents, and if they are ultimately a gateway to traditional smoking. He also noted the rapid growth in use of e-cigarettes among both adults and children.

"I'm concerned about e-cigarettes, and I think this is an area where we are in desperate need of clarity," Murthy said. "I think it's important for us to understand the impact, particularly on youth, before we allow the

full-fledged spread of these e-cigarettes and then later have problems that we have to deal with."

Last April, the Food and Drug Administration for the first time proposed a set of regulations for e-cigarettes, including banning sales to minors and requiring health warning labels, as well as approving new products. The agency has said its proposal sets a foundation for regulating the products, but the rules wouldn't immediately ban the wide array of flavors or styles of e-cigarettes or curb marketing on places like TV.

Scientists haven't finished much research on e-cigarettes, and the studies that have been done have been inconclusive. The government is pouring millions into research to supplement independent and company studies on the health risks of e-cigarettes and other tobacco products—as well as who uses them and why.

Historically, the surgeon general's office has played an important role in addressing tobacco issues.

A 1964 [surgeon general](#)'s report launched the anti-smoking movement. While far fewer Americans are smoking today—about 18 percent of adults—a report last year marking the 50th anniversary of the landmark paper warns that the government may not meet its goal of lowering that rate to 12 percent by 2020.

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