

Internet searches reflect vaping's surge

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The Oxford Dictionaries selected "vape"—as in, to smoke from an electronic cigarette—as word of the year in 2014. It turns out that Internet users' search behavior tells a similar story.

Between 2009 and 2015, the number of people in the United States seeking information online about vaping rose dramatically, according to a recent study co-led by San Diego State University Internet health expert John W. Ayers and University of North Carolina tobacco control expert Rebecca S. Williams as a part of the Internet Tobacco Vendors Study.

One finding from the study of particular concern to health officials and researchers is that when it comes to vaping, people are by and large searching for information on how and where to get vaping products, not for information on quitting cigarette smoking or the health effects of vaping.

E-cigarettes and other hand-held vaporizers began appearing on American shelves in the mid-2000s. Since then, they've quickly risen in popularity while regulators have been slow to adapt smoking legislation to account for these devices.

"Big Tobacco has largely taken over the e-cigarette industry. Alongside unchecked marketing and advertising, e-cigarettes have exploded online," Ayers said.

Internet users' search history bears this out. Ayers, Williams, and a team

of colleagues from across the country examined search history from Google Trends, which includes statistics on what specific words people searched for, the search term's popularity relative to all other concurrent searches in a specified time, date and geographic location. From this data, the researchers can find patterns that point to Internet searchers' apparent preferences and attitudes.

When they looked at searches related to e-cigarettes starting in 2009, they found a sharply rising trend through 2015 with no end in sight. For example, in 2014 there were about 8.5 million e-cigarette-related Google searches. For 2015, their model forecasts an increase in these searchers of about 62-percent.

Looking at geographic data, they found that e-cigarette searches have diffused across the nation, suggesting that e-cigarettes have become a widespread cultural phenomenon in every U.S. state. Over the same time period, searches for e-cigarettes far outpaced other "smoking alternatives" such as snus (smokeless tobacco) or nicotine gum or patches.

The researchers published their findings today in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. (Note: this URL will be active after the embargo lifts)

What most concerns the researchers, though, is that when people search for e-cigarette information, they're using search terms like: "best e-cig," "buy vapes" or "shop vaping."

"One of the most surprising findings of this study was that searches for where to buy e-cigarettes outpaced searches about health concerns or smoking cessation," Williams said. "Despite what the media and e-cigarette industry might have you believe, there is little research evidence to support the notion that e-cigarettes are safe or an effective

tool to help smokers quit. Given that, we think it's revealing that there were fewer searches about safety and cessation topics than about shopping."

In fact, she said, searches for e-cigarette safety concerns represented less than 1 percent of e-cigarette searches, and this number has declined over the past two years.

A linguistic trend also emerged from the study. The term "vaping" has quickly overtaken "e-cigarettes" as the preferred nomenclature in the United States. That's important for [health officials](#) and researchers to recognize, the team noted. Surveillance of smoking trends is done primarily through surveys and questionnaires, and knowing which terms people use can affect the accuracy of this data.

Also, one of the major weapons anti-smoking advocacy groups have is counter-advertising. In the Internet age, advertisers look for specific keywords to target their advertisements. Knowing that more people use the term "vaping" than "e-cig" helps them be more targeted and effective, Ayers said.

"Labels do matter," Ayers said. "When you call it 'vaping,' you're using a brand new word that doesn't have the same historical baggage as 'smoking' or 'cigarette.' They've relabeled it. Health campaigns need to recognize this so they can keep up."

Provided by San Diego State University

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