

Researchers find kids sneak smoking substitute into school

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A tobacco replacement to help grownups quit smoking has landed in the hands of children sucking on nicotine vapors to potentially harmful outcomes, new USC research shows.

The discreet little gadget called JUUL is little bigger than a pack of gum. Jon-Patrick Allem, research scientist at the Keck School of Medicine of USC, explores the intersection of social media and public health. His study of 80,000 tweets shows the JUUL vaporizer is widely used among high [school](#), middle school and even elementary school students in the United States.

"We found young people talking about using JUUL on school grounds, in classrooms, in bathrooms, in the library, at recess and during gym," Allem said. "JUUL vapors dissipate quickly, unlike the telltale cloud of previous e-cigarette 'vaping' devices, so it's a way for kids to use nicotine undetected."

Allem is lead author of the paper, which is a collaboration among scientists in USC's Department of Preventive Medicine and Department of Computer Science. It was published in the June 26 issue of *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*.

JUUL is a brand name for a new type of e-cigarette developed by San Francisco-based PAX Labs, Inc. The device consists of a USB flash drive-powered vaporizer that is easily concealed. Users insert cartridges called JUULpods containing nicotine salts found in tobacco leaves. The

device converts nicotine into steam that delivers a nicotine wallop; one JUULpod delivers about as much nicotine as a pack of cigarettes.

Pax Labs markets the device as a "smoking alternative" for adults trying to quit, but posts to Twitter show that minors use it to "vape" at school without being caught.

JUUL sales have been estimated at more than half of the U.S. e-cigarette market. PAX Labs, responding to early criticism from health advocacy groups, has positioned JUUL in its marketing campaigns and website (visitors must confirm they are 21 years or older) as a product to help adults quit smoking tobacco, which contributes to many diseases.

Nicotine use of any kind is known to be addictive and harmful to adolescent brain development. Allem said that in a sample of more than 80,000 posts to Twitter, about 1 in 25 mentioned using JUUL at school. Some of the tweets even link to videos of kids using JUUL.

"Despite JUUL's branding as a smoking alternative, very few Twitter users mentioned smoking cessation with JUUL," the study reports, observing that roughly 1 in 350 Twitter posts mentioned using JUUL to quit smoking, far less than posts about use at school.

Allem's research focuses on improving health surveillance using data from Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Google web search. Other authors of the study include Likhith Dhampuri, a doctoral student in computer science at USC; Jennifer B. Unger, a professor of preventive medicine at the Keck School of Medicine; and Tess Boley Cruz, assistant professor of clinical [preventive medicine](#) at the Keck School of Medicine.

The study was funded by a \$40,000 grant (P50CA180905) from the National Cancer Institute and the FDA Center for Tobacco Products to

determine the public's early experience with JUUL and the social and environmental context of its use. The findings offer a cautionary note for parents and school administrators and teachers. The study suggests educators might need to learn how to spot JUUL use while administrators may consider installing vaping detectors on campuses.

More information: Jon-Patrick Allem et al. Characterizing JUUL-related posts on Twitter, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2018.05.018](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2018.05.018)

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