

What do we really know about e-cigarettes and vaping?

February 12 2019, by Craig Chamberlain



Communication professor Cabral Bigman specializes in communication about risk and inequality related to health concerns. Her research on “speaking up about lighting up,” per the title of one paper, looks at the willingness of people to be assertive with smokers or vapers in public venues. Credit: Fred Zwicky

E-cigarettes get teenagers hooked on nicotine. Or they aid cigarette

smokers seeking to quit. Or they may be harmful in other ways. Those competing messages make the devices a tricky subject for health communicators, says Cabral Bigman, a professor of communication at Illinois whose research focuses on health communication issues around vaping. She spoke with News Bureau social sciences editor Craig Chamberlain.

What does the research say regarding public attitudes or beliefs around e-cigarettes? And how do those jibe with what we know?

Some people see the risks from vaping as similar to, or even greater than, [smoking](#). However, it is more common for people to think that vaping or exposure to secondhand vapor is less harmful. Current research suggests that vaping is less harmful overall than smoking. But less harmful doesn't necessarily mean no harm. The truth is that there isn't yet a good sense of the long-term effects of vaping or exposure to secondhand vapor or aerosol. The science is still evolving.

Some experts see e-cigarettes as a promising harm-reduction strategy for smokers. There is emerging evidence that under certain circumstances e-cigarettes may help with quitting smoking. One example is a U.K. study published in January in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, which found that counseling combined with the use of e-cigarettes was more effective than other nicotine-replacement methods combined with counseling.

However, it is worth noting that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has not specifically approved e-cigarettes for quitting smoking; there are alternative nicotine-replacement strategies that have a more established track record. In the U.K. study, most of the people who quit smoking with e-cigarettes were still vaping when researchers followed up with

them a year later. That wasn't the case for the other methods. So there may be risks and benefits to using e-cigarettes for this purpose.

A separate concern is that [young people](#) who aren't smokers are trying out vaping and putting themselves at increased risk from nicotine and potentially harmful chemicals. One of the most popular [e-cigarette](#) products right now contains a lot more nicotine per pod than a regular cigarette and therefore poses a risk of addiction, but people don't always realize that.

Overall, e-cigarettes are relatively untested products that have substantial variability in the kinds of chemicals they contain and how they work. At this point, there isn't a clear picture of what the long-term health impacts will be, including those from specific kinds of e-cigarette technologies and flavors.

Some of your studies in this area have looked at the willingness of individuals to speak up about others' cigarette smoking versus e-cigarette vaping in public venues. What have you found?

Based on our survey of U.S. adults, my colleagues and I found that Americans are more willing to speak up and object to other people smoking than to other people vaping in [public places](#) such as restaurants, bars and parks. For example, about 50 percent of the participants in our survey said they would ask someone not to smoke in a restaurant if they couldn't move away from the smoke, but only about 16 percent said the same about vaping.

Those findings make sense since, as I mentioned, Americans tend to see vaping as less risky than smoking. We found that people who saw vaping as harmful to their health were generally more supportive of regulations

to restrict it in public venues and to say they would speak up about it.

Why is this research important?

We are at a point right now where policymakers are putting a variety of tobacco-related policies into place across the U.S. Some policies, like the smoke-free policy on the Illinois campus, include vaping restrictions. This research helps us understand public opinion about [vaping](#). It also suggests that we shouldn't necessarily expect that individuals will speak up or enforce these smoke-free policies on their own, which could make those policies less effective.

Based on what we know and don't know about the health risks of e-cigarettes, what are the marketing messages that most concern you?

I'm most concerned about messages that appeal – intentionally or unintentionally – to children and adolescents, especially when those messages are misleading. The number of teens reporting e-cigarette use increased substantially in the last year. The U.S. surgeon general recently called use of e-cigarettes among youth an epidemic.

As for countering this trend, it is encouraging to see policymakers starting to take action, particularly because there is evidence of public support for policies that help curb access to, and the appeal of, e-cigarettes among children and teens.

Given the communication challenges in this area, it is important to have the facts – especially in an era when unreliable health information can proliferate on the internet and on social media. I would encourage people to seek out credible sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [to learn more about e-cigarettes](#), [the risks of vaping for kids](#)

[and young adults](#), and strategies for [quitting smoking](#).

More information: Richard Miech et al. Adolescent Vaping and Nicotine Use in 2017–2018—U.S. National Estimates, *New England Journal of Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1056/NEJMc1814130](https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMc1814130)

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