

North Carolina prosecutor expands fight against youth vaping

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In this April 23, 2014 file photo, a man smokes an electronic cigarette in Chicago. North Carolina's top prosecutor expanded his efforts to halt e-cigarette sales to teens on Monday, Aug. 26, 2019, by suing eight more manufacturers of vaping products. Josh Stein, the Democratic attorney general in the traditionally tobacco-friendly state, said he is filing lawsuits against eight e-cigarette companies in an announcement timed to grab attention during the first week of school. (AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh, File)

North Carolina's top prosecutor expanded his efforts to halt e-cigarette sales to teens on Tuesday by suing eight more manufacturers and sellers of vaping products.

Josh Stein, the Democratic attorney general in the traditionally tobacco-friendly state, said he's filing lawsuits against eight companies that make or sell e-cigarettes and related products in an announcement timed to grab attention during the first week of school.

He alleges that the companies market to young people with candy and dessert flavors on social media and don't use proper age verification for sales. He said he's asking courts to shut down their marketing and sales to underage people.

"We simply have to do more to protect kids, and I as attorney general of North Carolina refuse to stand by as e-cigarette companies entice thousands of children to use their products," Stein told reporters.

He said vape flavors including cotton candy, gummy bear and graham cracker are helping to fuel an "epidemic" of e-cigarette use among young people and threatening to reverse a downward trend in tobacco use in North Carolina and around the country.

"We simply cannot have another generation of young people addicted to nicotine," he said.

Stein said the new lawsuits target the companies Beard Vape, Direct eLiquid, Electric Lotus, Electric Tobacconist, Eonsmoke, Juice Man, Tinted Brew and VapeCo. The companies didn't immediately respond to messages seeking comment or didn't answer phone calls.

Stein announced in May he was suing the company that makes Juul, the dominant brand in the e-cigarette market. He said at the time that he was

the first state attorney general to take the e-cigarette maker to court. Meanwhile, the attorney general in Connecticut recently announced a probe into e-cigarette marketing practices.

Stein said Tuesday that his office has been in discussions with Juul as the litigation proceeds.

Juul Labs said in a statement that it's concerned about youth vaping and is working to reduce it. The company statement said that it has been cooperating with Stein's office, enhanced its online age verification process and stopped the sale of flavors other than tobacco and menthol in retail stores.

The rise of underage vaping has alarmed health officials, lawmakers and educators. Last year, one in five U.S. high school students reported vaping in the previous month, according to a government survey.

Overall, the retail market for e-cigarettes is approximately \$3.7 billion.

Health concerns related to vaping have made headlines in recent weeks, including an adult in Illinois who developed a lung disease after vaping and died. Utah health officials also recently announced an investigation into 21 cases of a lung disease linked to vaping, while federal officials are looking into as many as 150 possible cases of breathing illnesses among vapers across 16 states.

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