

DC government sues e-cigarette maker Juul over teen use

November 26 2019, by Matthew Perrone



In this Dec. 20, 2018, file photo a woman buys refills for her Juul at a smoke shop in New York. California is suing the nation's biggest e-cigarette maker, alleging Juul Labs deliberately targeted teenagers with its early marketing campaigns. The lawsuit filed Monday, Nov. 18, 2019, by California's attorney general is the latest legal action against Juul. The company faces multiple state and federal investigations into whether its early marketing efforts helped spark the current vaping craze among underage users. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig, File)

The District of Columbia is joining several states in suing the nation's largest e-cigarette maker Juul Labs, saying the company's online ads and promotions illegally targeted minors.

Washington, D.C., Attorney General Karl Racine announced the lawsuit Tuesday, alleging that Juul's viral marketing contributed to the surge in underage vaping by teens in the district and across the U.S.

The lawsuit also says that Juul misled consumers about the potent nicotine levels contained in its flavored pods.

The move follows similar lawsuits filed last week by California and New York. North Carolina became the first state to sue the San Francisco startup in May.

A Juul spokesman said Tuesday the company's products are intended for adults and that it is committed to combating underage vaping.

Under intense legal pressure, Juul recently suspended its U.S. advertising and halted sales of all but two of its flavors, menthol and tobacco. Additionally, the company closed its social media accounts, tightened age verification for online sales and replaced its CEO.

Juul, which launched in 2015, now controls roughly two-thirds of the U.S. retail market for e-cigarettes. The company also faces separate investigations by Congress, the FDA and other federal regulators.

Juul rocketed to the top of the vaping market based on the popularity of its high-nicotine pods, fruit and dessert flavors and early online marketing, which featured youthful, attractive models.

Racine said Tuesday the company's practices "unfairly and unconscionably dragged a new generation into nicotine addiction."

The lawsuit, filed in D.C. Superior Court, also alleges that Juul previously:

- made unsupported claims that its e-cigarettes are a safer alternative to traditional smoking,
- failed to adequately verify customers' ages before selling e-cigarettes through its website, and
- failed to implement a "secret shopping" program and other steps touted by the company to deter underage use.

The district also said it sent subpoenas to eight other vaping companies seeking information about their business and marketing practices.

Underage vaping has reached what health officials call epidemic levels. In the latest government survey, 1 in 4 high school students reported using e-cigarettes in the previous month, despite federal law banning sales to those under 18.

E-cigarettes, which have been available in the U.S. since about 2007, have grown into a multi-billion-dollar industry with little government regulation. The battery-powered devices typically heat a solution that contains nicotine, the drug that makes cigarettes and e-cigarettes addictive.

Most experts say vaping is likely less harmful than traditional smoking, which produce thousands of toxic chemicals. But there is little research on the long-term health effects of vaping.

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