

Vaping, opioids and 'Anti-vaxxers' top health stories of 2019

December 30 2019, by Healthday Editors,



(HealthDay)—The scourge of addiction among Americans young and

old made big headlines in 2019, as did one big change in heart health guidelines.

Here are the top health stories of the past year, as compiled by editors at *HealthDay*.

Vaping takes hold, and new dangers emerge

Perhaps no health issue dominated headlines this past year as much as the surge in vaping rates—and new, severe illnesses related to the nicotine-driven habit.

By the end of December, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that more than 2,500 people across all 50 states had been hospitalized with life-threatening respiratory dysfunction tied to recent e-cigarette use. Fifty-four of those patients died.

Research strongly suggests that an additive sometimes used in pot-laced vapes, called vitamin E acetate, may be triggering these illnesses.

But [health experts](#) have also raised a more general alarm about soaring rates of e-cigarette use among teens. One CDC report issued in November found about 1 in every 5 high school students said they'd vaped within the past month. Many experts are worried that hard-won gains against smoking will be lost as vaping—and its potential health hazards—gains new ground.

Many states have already banned the flavored varieties of e-cigarettes thought to be most enticing to youth. The Trump administration earlier this year suggested a similar ban, but so far has not followed through.

The opioid scourge continues

Across the United States, the misery unleashed by a flood of opioid prescription painkillers, as well as illicit opioids such as fentanyl and heroin, continued in 2019.

Tens of thousands of lives were lost to drug overdoses, and those tragedies have perhaps contributed to the first decline in U.S. life expectancy in generations, experts said.

The young are being hit especially hard. According to a study released in November from Virginia Commonwealth University, between 2014 and 2017 there's been a 6% increase in death rates among people aged 25 to 64, with death rates jumping 25% among [young adults](#) aged 25 to 44.

Even the youngest Americans aren't unscathed by the opioid crisis: A study published in December found that the care of American babies born with opioid-withdrawal syndrome costs \$500 million annually.

In the meantime, OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma—the drug company whose aggressive marketing of opioid painkillers has been blamed for triggering the crisis—filed bankruptcy in September. As reported by the *New York Times*, there are more than 2,600 pending federal and state lawsuits lodged against the company, and the pharmaceutical giant has proposed a resolution to most of them as part of its bankruptcy filing.

'Anti-vaxxers' gain power, and measles outbreaks escalate

Across the United States, a small but vocal minority of parents continued to refuse routine vaccinations for their children in 2019. This happened despite the vast majority of scientific evidence showing that immunization poses no great risk and has saved countless lives.

One tragic result: major outbreaks of highly contagious measles in anti-vaxxer "hotspots" across America, in an era where measles had only recently been declared eliminated nationwide. By the end of May, 971 cases of the highly contagious, vaccine-preventable illness had already been recorded, topping the prior record of 963 total annual cases last seen 27 years ago.

The issue is not just an American one: In July, an expert panel convened by the World Health Organization declared that "vaccine hesitancy" is now a global crisis, threatening the health of children worldwide. In November, the island nation of Samoa had to tackle its own measles epidemic, with over 5,600 people infected and 81 deaths reported, mostly among infants and children. After a mass vaccination effort, health officials just declared the six-week state of emergency in Samoa was over.

Surging interest in pot, CBD

As state after state relaxed laws over the medicinal and recreational use of marijuana, Americans took to the once-illicit drug in droves. And that had many parents and health experts concerned.

In fact, one study published in June found that regular pot use by U.S. teens has jumped 10-fold since the 1990s—from 0.6% of high schoolers in 1991 to 6.3% of teens by 2017. Many are vaping pot, or trying "edibles."

And there could be a real downside to the trend. Another study published in November found that in the four states that first legalized recreational marijuana use, rates of problematic "cannabis use disorder" have risen by 25% among teens and by 37% among adults over 25.

Interest in cannabidiol (CBD), an ingredient in cannabis that doesn't

provide a high, also soared among consumers in 2019. CBD oils, edibles, aromatherapies and even CBD-infused massages seemed to be everywhere this year.

But questions remain about the medicinal claims—and safety—of CBD products. So far, the FDA has only approved CBD for the easing of seizures in two rare forms of epilepsy.

Daily aspirin loses some luster

For decades, millions of Americans have taken low-dose "baby" aspirin each day to help lower their odds for heart disease, stroke and certain cancers.

But in March, the nation's two leading cardiologist groups—the American Heart Association (AHA) and the American College of Cardiology (ACC)—issued a joint statement backing away from prior recommendations.

Based on the latest evidence, the groups now say that for older adults at low risk—no history of heart attack, stroke or cardiac surgeries—the risk of bleeding that comes with daily low-dose aspirin is now thought to outweigh any heart benefit.

The AHA and ACC stressed that [daily aspirin](#) *does* have an important role to play for people at high risk for heart trouble—those with a prior history of heart attack, stroke or cardiac procedures such as stenting or open heart surgery.

In those cases, daily use of the blood-thinning pill "can be lifesaving," the groups said.

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Citation: Vaping, opioids and 'Anti-vaxxers' top health stories of 2019 (2019, December 30)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-12-vaping-opioids-anti-vaxxers-health-stories.html>

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