

Clearing The Smoke Over Youth E-Cigarette Use In Wheat Ridge

 ngazette.com/index.php/latest-issue/2996-clearing-the-smoke-over-youth-e-cigarette-use-in-wheat-ridge

By Mike McKibbin

December 17, 2018

Well over a quarter of Wheat Ridge High School students have used electronic cigarettes and nearly two-thirds think it would not be hard to obtain those increasingly controversial tobacco products, according to recent survey results.

E-cigarettes are battery-operated devices in many shapes and sizes that produce an aerosol by heating a liquid that usually contains nicotine, flavorings and other chemicals. E-cigarettes are known by different names, such as Electronic Nicotine Delivery System (ENDS), e-hookah, vape pen, mod, JUUL, tanks and vapes. JUULs are one of the most popular vaping products among youth. Although e-cigarettes are less toxic than traditional cigarettes, they are not considered safe.

Results from a Healthy Kids Colorado survey were included in a Dec. 6 presentation to more than a dozen school staff and parents about e-cigarette and marijuana use as part of the school's Breathe Easy, or BE, team program, sponsored by Jefferson County Public Schools and Jefferson County Public Health.

BE teams are high school clubs focused on preventing tobacco and substance use in their schools and communities. Along with the teams (other district high schools with BE teams are Lakewood and Jefferson), outreach includes training school staff and parents how to educate students and communities about the risks of teen vaping.

School nurse Rhonda Valdez said survey results for Wheat Ridge High School were based on responses from 267 students, or 21 percent of the student population. Those results found 37 percent of students had used an e-cigarette within the last 30 days, 67 percent think it would be easy to get an e-cigarette, even though 43 percent perceive such use as risky.

Sarah Boland, a data specialist in the health department's tobacco prevention initiative, said student e-cigarette users in Jefferson County were 9.5 times more likely to have used marijuana in the past 30 days, 8.8 times more likely to have participated in binge drinking of alcohol in the past 30 days and 8.6 times more likely to have used prescription drugs illegally. Boland said the vaping and marijuana use results are higher than the statewide numbers.

Use by youths who identify as LGBTQ was higher than heterosexual kids, too, Allyson Howe, a youth engagement specialist in the health department's tobacco prevention initiative, added.

"Last year, we found use by students who were from higher-income families, too," Valdez noted.

In an earlier interview, Donna Viverette, health promotion supervisor for the health department, noted data for e-cigarette and tobacco use in district schools was about the same as statewide numbers. For instance, 27 percent of high school students said they had used an e-cigarette or tobacco product at last once in the past 30 days, while 40 to 45 percent said they had used at least some of those products at least once.

Viverette said the survey also found students do not perceive e-cigarettes as harmful and they expected to use them at some time, so the potential for higher student usage may exist.

E-juice and aerosol can contain substances such as eye and respiratory irritants (propylene glycol and vegetable glycerin), carcinogens (formaldehyde and acetaldehyde), addictive and poisonous chemicals (nicotine and diethylene glycol), metal particulates (nickel and lead), flavor additives that can irritate lungs and cause symptoms of asthma (vanillin and cinnamaldehyde) and chronic lung disease (diacetyl).

Valdez stated the ingredients in e-cigarettes are very similar to those found in hair sprays.

"If the liquid these products produce were to be swallowed, it would be lethal for a 150-pound man," she said.

Valdez displayed a box of what she said were e-cigarette products confiscated from Wheat Ridge students. Youth possession or use of any tobacco product in Colorado, including e-cigarettes, is illegal.

Valdez said school policy calls for the school dean and parents to become involved when a student is caught with these products the first time. Repeat offenders face one day of in-school suspension and third-time offenders receive five days of out-of-school suspension. Local authorities are alerted as well, Valdez added.

Howe noted youth who ask a trusted adult about vaping were 31 percent less likely to use those products. Listening, having fact-based conversations with teens and establishing a smoke and vapor-free rule at home can help prevent tobacco use by youths and dispel the myth that vaping is harmless, according to presentation handouts.

E-cigarette companies have been criticized for allegedly marketing their products to youth, especially through social media, Howe said. What she called "intentional" marketing strategies included slogans such as "love your lungs," "made for adults to help quit smoking," and encouraging "stealth" vaping, since e-cigarettes do not produce much smoke or vapor and can't be smelled. Many brands offer flavored varieties as well, Howe noted, another enticement for youth to use the products.

Last year's Wheat Ridge BE team "really sounded the alarm" about the use of e-cigarettes by students, Viverette said.

"They said we really needed to do something because the JUULing was getting out of control," she added.

That led to an informational video about the growing risk of teen vaping.

“We think it really engages young people in a way to have a voice and raise awareness about tobacco and other related issues in school,” Viverette said.

Last year’s team also made presentations to community health care providers to stress the need to screen their young patients for the use of e-cigarettes since they felt it was an epidemic, Viverette added.

This year’s 12-member team has taken part in a youth advocacy workshop, she said. Howe noted this year’s team was learning how to make tobacco use a social justice issue and how it contributes to the common characteristics of certain demographics. Next semester, the team is to choose an overall project, Howe added.

The curriculum-based program has previously had teams conduct peer-to-peer interviews, walking surveys in school hallways and present their findings, Howe noted.