

Hawaii News

E-cigarettes tied to asthma in isle youth

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More teens are trying out e-cigarettes than the real thing, according to the government's annual drug use survey.

Hawaii teens who use e-cigarettes are more likely to have asthma, according to the latest research by the University of Hawaii.

UH scientists who studied a statewide sample of 6,089 high school students found that teens who used e-cigarettes were more likely to report having the chronic disease, which narrows the airways and restricts air flow into the lungs. The potentially dangerous condition often results in coughing, wheezing, chest tightness and shortness of breath.

“Data from this survey not only shows that e-cigarette use is related to smoking, but also suggests that e-cigarette use is related to asthma above and beyond the effect of cigarette smoking,” UH Cancer Center researcher Dr. Thomas Wills said in a news release. “It is important for public health to do everything possible to discourage smoking because of its many adverse health effects.”

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UH researchers are conducting further studies on the association between e-cigarettes and lung function to determine whether it actually causes asthma, he said.

Lila Johnson, manager of the state Department of Health Tobacco Prevention and Education Program, said asthma rates among high school students statewide rose slightly to 13.1 percent in 2015 from 12.7 percent two years earlier.

“We can’t make the correlation, but we have seen a modest increase in asthma and yes, we have seen an increase in electronic smoking devices,” she said.

In 2015 the number of local high school students who said they tried e-cigarettes jumped to 22.2 percent from 17.7 percent in 2013 and 5 percent in 2011.

“That was a fourfold increase,” Johnson said. “It has been alarming. As the research is coming out, electronic cigarettes are threatening to addict a new generation to nicotine. The danger is the nicotine. Studies have shown that nicotine exposure during adolescence can negatively impact brain development, cause serious addiction and also lead to persistent tobacco use. Tobacco use is the No. 1 preventable public health problem.”

In 2016 the state banned the sale of tobacco products including e-cigarettes to people under age 21 and made it illegal to use the electronic devices in public buildings,

places of employment, sports arenas and state parks.

Previous research by UH scientists was part of a review of nine e-cigarette studies across the United States that confirmed teenagers who use electronic cigarettes — but had never smoked tobacco — were more than three times as likely to smoke regular cigarettes one year later, while young adults were more than four times as likely. The electronic devices heat liquid that typically contains nicotine, flavorings and other chemicals to create a vapor that is inhaled.

“There is now no doubt that Hawaii teens are being affected by e-cigarettes just like young people elsewhere,” Wills said.

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