

Surgeon General Warns Youth Vaping Is Now An 'Epidemic'

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U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Jerome Adams said Tuesday that local restrictions, including bans on indoor vaping, are needed to reduce youth e-cigarette use.

Eric Baradat/AFP/Getty Images

Vaping by U.S. teenagers has reached epidemic levels, threatening to hook a new generation of young people on nicotine.

That's according to an unusual advisory issued Tuesday U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams about the the dangers of electronic cigarette use among U.S. teenagers.

"I am officially declaring e-cigarette use among youth an epidemic in the United States," Adams said at a news conference. "Now is the time to take action. We need to protect our young people from all tobacco products, including e-cigarettes."

The surgeon general's advisory called on parents and teachers to educate themselves about the variety of e-cigarettes and to talk with children about their dangers. Health professionals should ask about e-cigarettes when screening patients for tobacco use, the advisory said. And local authorities should use strategies, such as bans on indoor vaping and retail restrictions, to discourage vaping by young people.

The advisory was prompted by the latest statistics on vaping among youth, which found e-cigarette use among high school students has increased dramatically in the past year.

"We have never seen use of any substance by America's young people rise this rapidly," Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said at the briefing. "This is an unprecedented challenge."

Federal officials singled out JUUL electronic cigarettes for fueling the epidemic, noting that the sleek devices are by far the most popular electronic cigarettes among young people.

The company defended its products, saying it has taken steps to prevent young people from using them. For example, the company has stopped distributing some flavorings to retail stores and has taken other steps to make sure young people don't buy the devices online.

"JUUL Labs shares a common goal with the Surgeon General and other federal health regulators – preventing youth from initiating on nicotine," according to a statement from Victoria Davis, a JUUL spokesperson. "We are committed to preventing youth access of JUUL products."

The company's move came after the Food and Drug Administration announced plans to restrict the sale of flavored e-cigarettes to young people.

Officials say they are especially alarmed by the proportion of young people who don't realize that electronic cigarettes contain nicotine, which is a highly addictive drug. A single JUUL cartridge contains as much nicotine as a pack of 20 tobacco cigarettes.