

Summit County Sees Signs of a Teen Vaping Epidemic

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By Anna Huntsman



Juul pods and starter packs at a Summit County smoke shop.

Anna Huntsman / WKSU

E-cigarettes are branded as alternatives to cigarettes that can help people stop smoking. But teenagers are using these devices to *start* smoking. Schools across Summit County have seen an increase in vaping, and local health officials are working to combat the issue that's now considered a national epidemic.

Local school and health officials discuss the teen vaping epidemic.

At North High School in Akron, school resource officer Kevin Evans showed off something he confiscated from a student.

"This is a juul," he said.

North High School resource officer Kevin Evans holds a juul, an e-cigarette device popular with high school students.

It's a brand of e-cigarette shaped like a USB flash drive. Juuls are advertised as a smoking cessation device for adults, but they contain about as much nicotine as a pack of 20 cigarettes -- and they're getting in the hands of teenagers.

"It's certainly easier to hide, certainly easier to use, and it's socially more accepted right now than cigarettes," Evans said.

Accepted to the point where there are billboards that say "Beat the addiction – vape." But in December, the surgeon general declared vaping a national epidemic for America's youth. High school students are vaping at an increasingly high rate and, in turn, getting addicted to nicotine.

Vaping as a gateway

"Research is showing youth that start this, it's a one way street to not only long term vaping addiction, but also traditional tobacco use," said Cory Kendrick, director of population health at the Summit County health department. He said principals and superintendents across the county have identified this as a problem in their schools.

Cory Kendrick, director of population health at Summit County Public Health, is working to address teen vaping at schools throughout the county.

Credit Anna Huntsman / WKSU

"It's almost like a cool thing to do to show hey, I'm vaping in class," he said. "There's techniques on how to do this in class like blowing the vapor in your shirt and those sorts of things."

Eighteen-year-old Ashlee Barnett told me she tried vaping once when she was in the car with her friends.

"I was just like, 'Eh, like I don't know.' They were like 'it's not a big deal, it doesn't have nicotine in it, like, it's fine. You can just do it once and you don't have to do it ever again,'" she said. "I was just like, 'okay.'"

A juul, shown here, as well as other vaping devices contain flavor pods. Flavored juul pods are now only sold online to customers 21 and over.

Barnett said the vape was green apple flavored.

Lack of regulation cause for concern

While some vapor fluids are nicotine-free, Kendrick from Summit County Public Health says there is little government regulation on the devices, especially ones that are purchased online coming from overseas.

The fluid, or "juice," comes in many different flavors, which Kendrick suspects is one of the reasons vaping has become so popular among kids. According to a report from the U.S. Surgeon General, that juice contains cancer-causing substances.

North High School resource officer Evans said kids might not be informed of the health risks of these flavored e-cigarettes.

"If you've ever been around someone who's vaping or e-cigarettes, you get that sweet smell, and I'm not sure kids understand the harmful effects of it," he said.

A suburban problem

While vaping is a problem for Officer Evans, he says there are bigger concerns in the district, particularly with illegal drugs. According to Kendrick's research at the county health department, vaping seems to be more prevalent in the suburbs.

"The schools that have a higher socioeconomic status, students can afford more," he said. "Juuls aren't cheap...whereas you can get a two pack of black and mild cigarettos for a dollar."

At Green High School just south of Akron, Principal Cindy Brown has seen an increase in students vaping over the past three years. She said principals at similar schools are seeing the uptick as well.

Cindy Brown, principal at Green High School in suburban Summit County, says she's seen an increase in vaping incidents in recent years at the school.

"One of the principals said they've had 40 incidents this year so far...it's, you know, a couple times a week we're catching someone with a vape."

The 2018 National Youth Tobacco Survey found that high school student e-cigarette use increased 78% from 2017 to 2018.

Limiting access

One way officials nationwide are trying to combat the teen vaping epidemic is through Tobacco 21, an initiative focused on raising the legal age to purchase tobacco from 18 to 21. In Summit County, six of the 33 municipalities have already passed this ordinance, including Akron and Green.

But Green principal Cindy Brown said kids can still find ways to vape. Some have told her adults have bought the devices for them. She's also seen other ways.

"I think a lot of people get around that doing it through some online purchases and buying loadable credit cards, you know, like a visa gift card or something like that, and then kids can use that to purchase them online."

Brown said the health classes at Green teach a whole unit on vaping in order to inform students of the health risks. Districts across the county have adopted stricter punishments for vaping in their codes of conduct. Kendrick says the county needs to take steps to inform both parents and kids about the dangers of vaping.

"It's something we're going to have to look at as a community – how do we solve this issue, especially for those who are already addicted," he said.

The Tobacco 21 ordinance was recently introduced to Stow City Council. If passed, Stow would become the seventh municipality to raise the tobacco buying age to 21 in Summit County.