

JOURNAL REPORTS: HEALTH CARE

Do E-Cigarettes Do More Good Than Harm?

A debate over which is bigger: the damage from the rise in teenage vaping or the benefits of using e-cigarettes to stop tobacco smoking



Recent studies show e-cigarettes are effective in helping people quit smoking—and that teenagers who vape are far more likely to smoke tobacco. PHOTO: EVA HAMBACH/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Feb. 6, 2019 10:00 p.m. ET

The rise of e-cigarettes is often seen through two completely different lenses.

On one side: Their surging use among teenagers has caused widespread alarm because of health concerns about e-cigarettes themselves and worries that they encourage youngsters to eventually smoke tobacco.

But then there are those who see e-cigarettes as an important tool in the fight to get current smokers to give up tobacco and save themselves from the many diseases, often fatal, that traditional cigarettes can cause.

Studies have provided fuel for both sides. Just since late last month, one study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* concluded that e-cigarettes were far more effective than other nicotine-replacement products in helping people quit smoking, while another study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* concluded that teenagers who vaped were far more likely to smoke tobacco.

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Here, David Abrams, a professor of social and behavioral sciences at the NYU College of Global Public Health, acknowledges that teen vaping must be combated but emphasizes e-cigarettes' role in helping people quit smoking. Matthew L. Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, takes the opposite position, arguing that the damage vaping is doing to youngsters is undeniable while the potential benefit of e-cigarettes remains unproven.

YES: Millions of Smokers Have Quit Since E-Cigarettes Were Introduced

By David Abrams

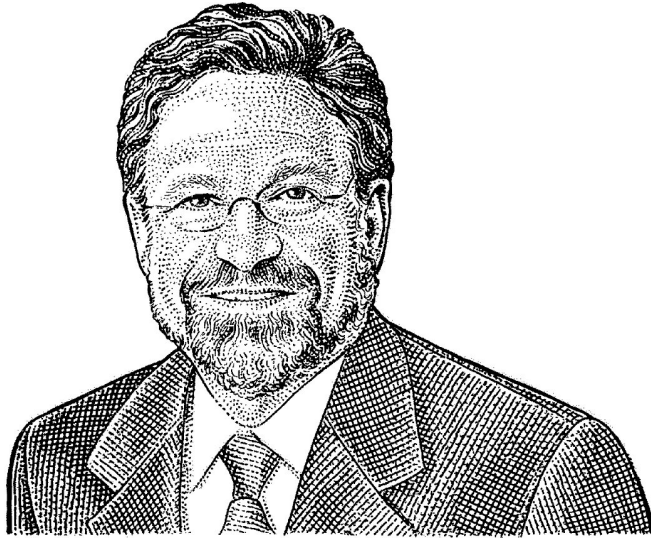
About three million teens tried an e-cigarette at least once in the past month— unquestionably, a tide that should be stemmed. But concern about the effect of vaping on young people must not overshadow the benefit of e-cigarettes in helping people quit smoking tobacco.

In the big picture, in fact, e-cigarettes are doing much more good than harm, and so their use by tobacco smokers should be encouraged, even as their use among youngsters is discouraged.

More than 500,000 U.S. smokers die prematurely annually, and 15 million suffer the burden of debilitating diseases from inhaling toxic tobacco smoke. Switching from tobacco to smoke-free products like e-cigarettes can save people's lives.

Large government surveys and published research show millions of smokers have successfully quit since e-cigarettes were introduced in the U.S., substantially reducing the harm to these smokers-turned-vapers. A 2019 study by the Food and Drug Administration confirmed dramatic reductions in toxic exposures, as did a 2018 U.S. National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine Report and the prestigious United Kingdom's Royal College of Physicians. In England, vaping as part of harm reduction is endorsed unequivocally by government, medical and public-health authorities. Public Health England and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention celebrated the lowest smoking rates ever recorded last year.

Critics dismiss the research that shows e-cigarettes are effective tools to help smokers quit tobacco. They say it's inconclusive. I agree that there is always a need for more evidence showing how best to use vaping to save smokers' lives. But the science is strong and getting stronger—last week a New England Journal of Medicine study showed e-cigarettes doubled cessation compared with nicotine-replacement medications. What's more, the



research the critics cite that shows vaping makes smokers *less* likely to quit is based on a fundamentally flawed and debunked analysis.

I remain mindful of the potential risk that vaping could lead to young people becoming cigarette smokers. But as of now, the data indicate that if this is happening, it is not doing so at a large enough level to tilt the balance:

My analysis, along with others', indicates that, considering both youth and adult use, increased vaping is likely to be a great benefit to public health even in a worst-case scenario of increased teen smoking.

That said, I absolutely agree that we should continue to work to minimize youth use of any nicotine-containing product. I agree with efforts to raise the minimum purchase age for any nicotine or tobacco product to 21. The FDA has taken and will continue to take action to restrict the availability of e-cigarettes to adolescents. The FDA efforts announced recently—including stringent age verification for buying online and limiting e-cigarettes in the retail market—should be given a chance to work.

It must be kept in mind that there is growing evidence that flavors other than tobacco and menthol—which remind smokers of their old lethal cigarettes—are critical for smokers to switch completely to e-cigarettes. It is vital that flavored e-cigarettes are available anywhere that sells dangerous cigarettes, with all sales strictly limited to adults.

Meanwhile, misconceptions about both nicotine and vaping distort the debate about e-cigarettes. Nicotine, though critical to why cigarettes are addictive, isn't directly responsible for the harm caused by smoking, including cancers, heart disease and lung disease. Yet the National Cancer Institute reports that 71% of the public mistakenly believes or is unsure about whether nicotine causes cancer. And just 17% percent of the public correctly believes that vaping is less harmful than smoking.

If smokers don't believe vaping is much less harmful than smoking, why would they switch? We need proactive, consistent public-education messages that state the whole truth explicitly—that nicotine without smoke is much safer.

Our research shows if most U.S. smokers switched to e-cigarettes over the next 10 years, more than six million deaths and 86 million lost quality life years would be averted. We must rethink

nicotine without smoke as an ally for reducing the harm done by burning tobacco and act decisively to educate smokers at any age to ditch cigarettes and switch completely to e-cigarettes—until society is smoke-free.

Dr. Abrams is a professor of social and behavioral sciences at the NYU College of Global Public Health. He can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

NO: Young People Who Use E-Cigarettes Are More Likely to Become Smokers

By Matthew L. Myers



To date, the evidence of harm from e-cigarettes is far clearer than any evidence of possible good: Vaping among young people has skyrocketed, exposing adolescents to clear harm, while evidence that e-cigarettes help smokers quit remains inconclusive.

There is no question that use of e-cigarettes among youths has reached what Food and Drug

Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb and U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams have called epidemic levels. The National Youth Tobacco Survey found that, in 2018 alone, e-cigarette use among high-school students rose by 78%, to 20.8% of the student population. More than 3.6 million middle and high-schoolers now use e-cigarettes.

E-cigarettes pose serious health risks for children. The Surgeon General has warned that youth use of nicotine in any form is unsafe, can cause addiction and can harm the developing brain, affecting learning, memory and attention. Studies also show that young people who use e-cigarettes are more likely to become smokers later. A comprehensive 2018 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine concluded, “There is substantial evidence that e-cigarette use increases risk of ever using combustible tobacco cigarettes among youth and young adults.” The same report also concluded that “there is limited evidence that e-cigarettes may be effective aids to promote smoking cessation.”

In addition, as a number of studies and FDA Commissioner Gottlieb have noted, the data indicate that e-cigarettes are dramatically increasing the number of children at risk, because it is very often the children who wouldn’t have smoked who are using e-cigarettes.

In contrast, the evidence that e-cigarettes help smokers quit traditional cigarettes completely is limited and inconsistent, according to recent studies and the 2018 National Academies report. Up to now, the large majority of e-cigarette users also continue to smoke cigarettes, and studies indicate those people actually reduced their likelihood of quitting and do not reduce their risk of disease. Compounding the problem, smokers lack accurate information about which, if any, e-cigarettes may help them quit, because no manufacturer has yet submitted such evidence to the FDA.

The U.S. experience with e-cigarettes is markedly different than in England, and the U.K. policy is an outlier compared with other countries. Cigarettes and e-cigarettes face much stricter marketing limits and other regulations there than in the U.S., and the most popular e-cigarette in the U.S. contains nicotine levels far above what U.K. law permits. As a result, youth use has not surged there as it has in the U.S. Based on the U.S. experience, it is premature to promote e-cigarettes as a proven way to help smokers quit, and we must be careful not to reinforce misperceptions among many youths that e-cigarettes are harmless.

E-cigarettes didn't become wildly popular with kids by accident. E-cigarette makers targeted the youth market, in part by introducing products in sweet, child-friendly flavors. Meanwhile, the FDA didn't begin to regulate e-cigarettes until August 2016 and subsequently delayed until 2022 a public-health review of e-cigarettes that were already on the market. E-cigarette companies took advantage of this delay to continue marketing kid-friendly products and avoid the need to develop scientific evidence showing whether their products do help smokers quit. The FDA must reverse this delay.

The FDA recently took steps to limit sales of flavored e-cigarettes in stores, but must go further to reverse the youth epidemic. It should prohibit all flavored e-cigarettes that have not been subject to public-health review, stop online sales of e-cigarettes until stronger safeguards are in place to prevent sales to kids, restrict youth-oriented marketing, and enforce rules prohibiting the sale of new products without FDA authorization.

There is little scientific evidence, by the way, and no rigorous studies to support claims that flavors are critical for smokers to switch completely to e-cigarettes. In contrast, there is conclusive evidence that flavors play a critical role in youth use of e-cigarettes.

In the end, the choice is not between protecting children and helping smokers. Only with effective FDA regulation can we reverse the youth epidemic and finally learn which, if any, e-cigarettes are effective at helping smokers quit cigarettes completely.

Mr. Myers is the president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. He can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

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