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Study Questions If Vaping Helps Smokers Quit As Feds Eye Tougher Regulations

A study by Ohio State University researchers found people who both vape and smoke cigarettes are not any more likely to stop using nicotine than those who just smoke.

The report comes as federal regulators announced their intent to make flavored tobacco and vapor products less accessible in an effort to keep young people from picking up the habit.

The OSU [study](#) followed a group of Ohioans considered heavy tobacco users, or those who smoke every day or at least some days of the week. After six months, dual users – those who use both tobacco and vapor products – were more likely to have stopped using tobacco. After a year and again after 18 months, that change disappeared, and most dual users were back to smoking just cigarettes by the study's end.

"The initial difference we saw might be due to a higher interest in quitting among the dual users, but that higher quit rate vanished with time," lead author Laura Sweet, a graduate student in the College of Public Health, said in a statement. "Tobacco is such a huge killer, and if these products help people quit, that could be really significant for public health. But in this study, it looks like they don't, and we need to know that as well."

While much remains unknown about the long-term effects of electronic cigarettes and other vapor products, the authors said they are believed to be less harmful than cigarettes for adults. They voiced concerns that younger people who start using vapor products will then switch to cigarettes.

"The hope would be that adult cigarette smokers are trying e-cigarettes because they want to stop cigarettes and are looking for alternatives to help them," said senior author Mary Ellen Wewers, professor emeritus of health behavior and health promotion.

The study comes less than a week after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced it intends to tighten regulations on flavored vapor and tobacco products. In a [statement](#), FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said the agency will seek to have vapor products other than tobacco, mint and menthol flavors sold in age-restricted in-person locations or under heightened age verification practices online.

The FDA also announced it would seek to ban menthol in combustible tobacco products, including cigarettes and cigars, and to ban flavors in cigars.

"The bottom line is that these efforts to address flavors and protect youth would dramatically impact the ability of American kids to access tobacco products that we know are both appealing and addictive," Commissioner Gottlieb said. "This policy framework reflects a re-doubling of the FDA's efforts to protect kids from all nicotine-containing products. They also reflect a very careful public health balance that we're trying to achieve. A balance between closing the on-ramp for kids to become addicted to nicotine through combustible and non-combustible products, while maintaining access to potentially less harmful forms of nicotine delivery through (electronic devices) for adult smokers seeking to transition away from combustible tobacco products."

Micah Berman, an associate professor of public health and law at OSU, said the FDA's proposal is "a step in the right direction, but far too little and far too late."

"The FDA has referred to youth e-cigarette use as an 'epidemic,' but the time to contain an epidemic is before it spreads – not after," he said in an email. "The impact will be limited, especially with mint and menthol flavors being exempted."

The proposal to ban flavored cigars and menthol cigarettes would both have significant public health advantages, he said, but the FDA has to follow through.

"The FDA also needs to move forward on its announced plan to reduce nicotine levels in cigarettes to non-addictive levels," he said. "E-cigarette use, and youth e-cigarette use in particular, would be far less worrisome in a world where cigarette were non-addictive and kids did not 'graduate' from e-cigarettes to cigarettes."

The OSU study pointed to the need for more research into how effective vapor products are at helping smokers quit, Mr. Berman said.

"If e-cigarette companies believe that their products help people to quit smoking, then they should provide that evidence to the FDA," he said. "We shouldn't just take the companies at their word that they're helping people to quit."

The FDA's announcement was met with skepticism by those in the tobacco and vapor industry.

Murray Garnick, executive vice president and general counsel of Altria Group Inc., which produces Marlboro cigarettes among other products, welcomed efforts to target underage use of vapor products but suggested policymakers work to raise the tobacco purchase age to 21.

"We also applaud FDA's continued recognition of the potential for innovative, less harmful products that can deliver nicotine to adults who want them," he said in a statement. "We continue to believe that a total ban on menthol cigarettes or flavored cigars would be an extreme measure not supported by the science and evidence. We expect that establishing product standards on menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars will be a multi-year, deliberative process, and we will be fully engaged throughout."

Gregory Conley, president of the American Vaping Association, said the move to limit underage access to vapor products would also hinder access for adults looking for a less harmful alternative to

combustible tobacco products.

"Allowing convenience stores to continue selling mint and menthol pods is hardly a compromise worthy of applause," he said in a statement. "In the coming days or weeks, adult ex-smokers will find themselves unable to easily purchase products that have helped them become smoke-free. Tragically, some ex-smokers will likely end up relapsing back to cigarettes because of this reckless policy shift."

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