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Column: Youth vaping remains a burning issue in Fox Valley and beyond



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Plenty of Kane County kids are vaping. How many depends on who you talk to. Checking in with teens from a half-dozen high schools in the Fox Valley, I got estimates from as low as 20% to a high of 60% when it comes to the number of their peers who vape.

Going by a 2022 Illinois Youth Survey of middle-school students, the number for Kane County is 5% of kids in that age range who vape, which is above the 3.3% reported from around the country according to the National Tobacco Use Survey of the same year.

High school numbers locally came in at around 8% for 10th-graders and 11% for 12th-graders as far as vaping, according to the 2022 Illinois Youth Survey.

The 2024 data is not out yet, but Tina Koral, [health] promotions manager for the Kane County Health Department, is hoping all those numbers – official and unofficial – go down.

Koral admits those who take surveys don't always give honest answers. But the undisputed fact is, too many kids are using these smokeless e-cigarettes because, for one thing, it's easier to get away with than puffing on a cigarette and stinking up, say, the girls bathroom.

And all those fancy and ever-changing vape containers make it hard for parents to figure out what is what, even for those trying to be vigilant.

Plus, teens think vaping is safe, a fallacy Koral wants to dispel any way she can.

So what are the need-to-know facts about vaping and kids?

For starters, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, e-cigarettes contain nicotine, a highly addictive substance that can harm young brains. Even worse, e-cigarettes can contain other harmful substances besides nicotine; plus, those who start with vaping are more likely to smoke cigarettes in the future, according to officials with the federal agency.

Koral refers to a recent NPR story that highlighted how young adults who got started using these flavored disposable vapes as teens were having trouble shaking the habit as they got older.

And the one bullet point parents should pay particular attention to – some e-cigarettes use devices that look like USB flash drives, pens and other everyday items that can too easily camouflage the vaping going on.

All of the above are reasons the Kane County Health Department is targeting youth by working closely with local schools on anti-smoking curriculums. Whether the answers I got from a sampling of teens is off the mark or right on the money, their perception that between 20% and 60% of students are vaping says something critical about how prevalent this habit has become among their peers.

But targeting youth is not the only way the health department is trying to make Kane County healthier. According to Koral, to qualify for a \$157,000 Tobacco-Free

Communities Grant from the Illinois Department of Public Health, the Kane County Health Department is hitting other objectives besides anti-tobacco education, including raising awareness of the Quit Tobacco Help Line, assisting behavioral health treatment facilities with tobacco cessation programs, working with businesses and organizations to create smoke-free spaces and promoting the Smoke Free Illinois Act, which in January added e-cigarette devices to the law that prohibits smoking in public places indoors and outside at public places if the user is within 15 feet of an entrance.

Which brings me to the reason the Kane County Health Department was so pleased when they heard the Aurora Farmers Market updated its policy for the 2024 season, taking the new law a step further by banning e-cigarettes from its entire grounds.

“We know that the nicotine in most vapes is powerfully addictive, and that the flavors in vapes can cause lung irritation,” said Michael Isaacson, Kane County Health Department executive director, in a press release last week praising the Aurora Farmers Market “for providing smoke- and vape-free outdoor events.”

For Felicia Freitag, manager of the Aurora market, that decision “was a no-brainer.” “The biggest thing is we want to make sure this is a safe environment and that people feel comfortable when they come here,” she told me.

And what better place to promote a healthy lifestyle than an event featuring the freshest of fruits and vegetables and other natural products from our good Earth. The new policy, Freitag added, “simply aligns with our values and our mission.” That’s music to the ears of the Kane County Health Department, which hopes that attitude will spread.

While there are other places that prohibit all smoking and vaping, Koral described this market’s decision to go beyond the law a welcome “rarity.” Vaping is not only unsafe for the e-cigarette user, it creates unhealthy second-hand aerosol, not to mention unsightly and hard-to-recycle litter from the plastic vapes, she said.

Which is why the Aurora Farmers Market deserves this public pat on the back “for thinking of the welfare of others,” Koral insisted. “And we’d like to encourage other farmers markets and outdoor venues to do it as well.”

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