

Rates high for Utah teens using e-cigs

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SALT LAKE CITY — Vaping of e-cigarettes is becoming more popular and smoking traditional cigarettes is not losing its luster in the Beehive State, according to the state health department's annual report on smoking in Utah.

The rate of regular e-cigarette use more than doubled from 2012 to 2013, and from 2011 to 2013, it has tripled among Utah students.

The Utah Department of Health reports that 4.8 percent of adults and 5.8 percent of teens routinely use the nicotine vapor product, according to 2013 data, the latest available.

However, experimentation rates reported among Utah teens range from 4.3 percent in Utah County to 30.4 percent in Weber and Morgan counties. About 7.6 percent of adults in central Utah report experimenting with e-cigarettes, ranging to 19.6 percent in Weber and Morgan counties, according to the report.

Perhaps more concerning, officials say, is that the overall smoking rate of conventional cigarettes hasn't changed much in the past five years and still hovers around 10.2 percent, "so not as many people are using these new products to quit, which is different than manufacturers would like you to think," said Anna Guymon, a health educator with the Weber-Morgan Health Department.

"Put simply, if the rate of e-cigarette use has increased more than twofold in just one year, yet the rate of cigarette smoking hasn't changed, we have a problem," said Adam Bramwell, spokesman for the Utah Department of Health's Tobacco Prevention and Control Program.

The report states that 60 percent of e-cigarette users are still smoking regular cigarettes, which Bramwell said is like "double-dipping the nicotine bowl."

Advertising, he said, draws people in with promises of a better, cleaner way to satisfy a nicotine craving.

"Many people are adopting the use of these devices thinking they are safe, thinking they are a way to quit and thinking they are something they can just kind of toy around with," Bramwell said. "While we don't (yet) know the long-term health effects of them, we do know that they are extremely addictive."

The highest use of the devices in the state can be found among teens in Weber and Morgan counties, where 30.4 percent report experimenting with e-cigarettes and 20.2 percent report regular use.

"A lot of these (youths) would never pick up a conventional tobacco product," Anna Guymon said, adding that e-cigarettes have been found in the hands of kids as young as elementary school

age. "They're getting them from other kids who are also getting them from stores that are not following the law."

The full report can be found at www.tobaccofreeutah.org.

Officials with the Weber-Morgan Health Department said that because e-cigarette use among adults there is much lower — 7.6 percent — kids must be getting the devices from smoke shops that are not following state law, which prohibits the sale of any nicotine-containing product to minors.

"We don't have the capacity to do compliance checks right now to ensure that retailers are complying with the law," Guymon said. "There really aren't enforcement mechanisms in place."

Flashy and potentially inaccurate marketing of the product, she said, also greatly impacts youths.

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Keeping track of retailers, she said, is also a problem, as enticing flavored e-cigarette cartridges can be purchased online and mixed at home — much of the contents of which are unknown to buyers.

"We've never seen use rates this high," Guymon said, adding she is worried for teens who use e-cigarettes. "They are more susceptible to nicotine because of the changes their brains are undergoing during adolescence."

The youth use rate of conventional cigarettes is reported at 3.9 percent.

The health department reports that nearly 90 percent of adult tobacco users started smoking before the age of 18.

Information on how to quit and free cessation services can be found online, at www.waytoquit.org.

The Weber-Morgan Health Department is exploring options with city officials to enact regulations on retailers, as several other cities in Utah have done. When similar rules were adopted for conventional tobacco products, Guymon said the rate of illegal sales to minors decreased 81 percent in the area.

"We need to ensure we have those in place," she said. "I don't have a business degree, but when you look at the data from our area ... the customer base isn't what they say it is."