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Study: E-cigarettes may cause cancer-like cell growth

BU researcher's preliminary finding
Lindsay Kalter April 18, 2015

Electronic cigarettes, widely seen as a safer alternative to tobacco, may actually cause cancer-like cell growth in users' airways, according to a potentially bombshell preliminary study by a local researcher.

"The prevailing wisdom is that they're less harmful than cigarettes," said Dr. Avrum Spira, professor of medicine at Boston University School of Medicine. "But there is definitely some evidence of damage to cells that have been exposed. The electronic cigarette contains liquids, and when they burn, they have other substances in the liquid that could be disease-causing."

"We really have no idea the potential health consequences yet," he added. Spira was one of the first in the nation to get funding from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to study the effects of "vaping," or smoking e-cigarettes.

Preliminary results from Spira's study suggest that the vapor causes cells from human airways to multiply rapidly, like cancer cells, and also to undergo similar genetic changes to the cells of regular smokers.

Spira said the research is in its fledgling stages, but he hopes to publish some of the early results within the next couple of months.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Thursday that the percentage of high school students who tried e-cigarettes tripled last year, to more than 13 percent.

Boston Public Schools officials have taken notice of the CDC's reported surge, and have included for the first time this year a question about e-cigarette use in its Boston Youth Risk Behavior Survey distributed to middle and high school students.

"At this point we're going to be taking a look," said Denise Snyder, BPS spokeswoman. "If there seems to be an issue, we'll be considering what

type of measures can be taken.”

The CDC report is “certainly a concern,” and the products seem to be marketed toward children and teenagers using features like cherry and bubble-gum flavoring, said Nancy Rigotti, director of the Tobacco Research and Treatment Center at Massachusetts General Hospital.

“It looks to me,” Rigotti said, “like the marketing is working.”

There are no federal regulations on e-cigs, but the FDA has a rule in the pipeline that would expand its authority to include them. About 43 percent of Massachusetts municipalities have some type of restrictions in place for their distribution.

Richard S. Pieters, president of the Massachusetts Medical Society, said the organization is working with state agencies to develop more stringent regulations. “We’re running the risk of creating a whole new generation of smokers,” Pieters said, “which will undo 50 years of public health efforts in smoking-reduction.”

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