

Tobacco and Vaping:

# The Bad and the Ugly

BY ILENE OLSON



When she began smoking at age 15, Carrie Pacileo of Powell was sure she would be able to stop anytime she wanted to.

“I didn’t foresee it as being as addictive as it was,” said Pacileo, now 45. “I just kind of figured, ‘It’s not going to be a problem to quit. But ... the next thing you know, I was smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.’”

Pacileo said smoking is so addictive that it “messes with your priorities.”

“It’s a really sad thing, when in between paydays, you have \$100 left, and you tell yourself, ‘I’m going to have to spend at least \$35 on cigarettes ... so, are we going to be able to afford milk?’”

After two unsuccessful tries, Pacileo was able to quit smoking on her third attempt earlier this year. “It’s been a rough road,” she said.

## Smoking declining statewide

Here in Wyoming, approximately 19 percent of adults were current smokers in 2018—down from about 24 percent in 2011, according to the CDC Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. While that statewide decrease is good news, Wyoming still has a higher percentage of people who smoke than the national median, which was about 16 percent in 2018. The national median also declined five percentage points since 2011, when it stood at 21 percent.

Significant drops in smoking rates also were reported among

youth in Wyoming. According to the Wyoming Prevention Needs Assessment Survey, the percentage of high school students who reported that they had never smoked cigarettes in their lifetime dropped from 54.33 in 2008 to 68.75 in 2018. In other words, reported smoking among high school students is decreasing.

Unfortunately, the decline in smoking among youth in the state is not the good news it appears to be.

“What has changed the landscape is vaping,” said Powell Police Chief Roy Eckerdt, who also serves as chairman of the Healthy Park County board. “Tobacco has definitely been a success, but vaping has changed all that.”

## E-cigarette use escalating among youth

Vaping describes the use of electronic cigarettes, or e-cigarettes, which vaporize a liquid form of nicotine. E-cigarettes originally were marketed, in part, as a possibly healthier alternative to smoking. But youth have taken to vaping in big numbers.

Because it is so new, vaping was added to the Wyoming Prevention Needs Assessment Survey for the first time in 2018, so there are no comparison figures. But that survey tells the much of story by itself. That year, only 46.11 percent of Wyoming high school students surveyed said they never vaped. That means more than half of high-schoolers across the state had tried e-cigarettes at some point, and 22.06 percent—more than one in five—said they vaped on 40 or more occasions.

Jason Mincer of the Wyoming Chapter of the American Cancer Association Cancer Action Network said the tobacco industry came up with the term “vaping.”

“An e-cigarette sounds dangerous,” he said. “Vaping makes it sound better.”

Community Prevention Manager Wendy Morris, with Healthy Park County, said both terms—e-cigarette and vaping—give students a way to avoid the vaping issue during discussions or when responding to a Prevention Needs Assessment.

“Some of the kids think that they’re ahead of us when we gather data,” Morris said. “When they see ‘electronic cigarette device,’ a kid might say, ‘I Juul [the name of an e-cigarette brand], so I don’t do that.’ Now, we list all the possible names that they could go by.”

Morris provided statistics from the CDC showing that current smoking among high school students in the United States fell from about 16 percent in 2011 to about 6 percent in 2019. But, in 2019, one of every four students (27.5 percent) vaped in 2019, compared to only 1.5 percent in 2011.

Students have a perception that vaping isn’t harmful or dangerous. When asked if they smoke, many teenagers recoil, saying something like, “I wouldn’t do THAT,” Morris said. But they feel comfortable with vaping.

“Many of them do not realize that there is nicotine in the products, so that is information that is typically new to them,” Morris said. “They are very enticed and intrigued by the different flavors, and they call it juice.”

## Marketing targeted to youth; health risks still unknown

Rep. R.J. Kost, R-Powell, has worked to prevent the use of tobacco and e-cigarettes by youth from three different viewpoints: as a state legislator, a longtime educator and as a member of Healthy Park County.

Rep. Kost said tobacco companies have targeted their marketing of e-cigarettes particularly to younger people, making it appealing by adding flavors and by designing them to look attractive and deceptive. Many e-cigarettes look like pens, thumb drives or other things that a parent or educator may not recognize as a vaping device, he said.

“When you look at the ads, when you look at the products, it’s pretty obvious who they’re targeting,” he said. “Vaping looks kind of cool and neat, and the next thing you know, youth are trying this stuff, and there’s health problems. ... Now the data is starting to come in, and there are some alarming issues.”

“There is reason to be concerned,” agreed Hannah Eck, Tobacco Prevention and Control Program manager for the Wyoming Department of Health. “There is not a lot of long-term research on the effects of these products, so there may be long-term effects we may not be aware of yet.”

That became very clear last fall when young people around the country became very ill with lung problems after vaping regularly. The CDC continues to investigate that outbreak of lung injuries, Morris said.

## Harmful to developing brains

What is known is that nicotine is harmful to developing brains. When used by a young person whose brain is still developing, nicotine impacts connections in the brain, affecting learning, attention and moods. Research has shown that brain development continues until about age 25, Eck said.

Eck noted that the nicotine level in e-cigarettes generally is very high, though it varies among different brands and devices. One e-cigarette often contains the same amount of nicotine that is present in a pack of 20 cigarettes.

“The nicotine in these products crosses the blood-brain barrier more quickly [than nicotine from traditional cigarettes] and it’s easier to consume a lot of nicotine more quickly,” Eck said. “We don’t know, at that level of exposure, what the effects may be.”

Additional research indicates that youth who use e-cigarettes also are more at risk for other addictions. “It primes the brain,” Eck said.

Byron Oedekoven, executive director of the Wyoming Association of Sheriffs and Chiefs, agreed. He said tobacco is considered an entry drug, not only by law enforcement, but also by professionals in psychological circles.

“Very seldom do you get someone who wakes up someday and says, ‘I think I’ll try meth today,’ Oedekoven said. “Usually, they have a history of tobacco use and a few other things first.”

## E-cigarettes largely unregulated

The health risks of smoking and smokeless tobacco are well documented, but e-cigarettes are so new that they are largely unregulated. They have not been approved by the Food and Drug Association, so little is known about what ingredients they may contain, Eck said.

“There could be heavy metals in there, and different chemicals that are also found in cigarettes,” she said.

The plan has always been that e-cigarettes will require FDA approval. In the meantime, “these products are allowed to stay on the market until they are reviewed by the FDA,” she said.

Currently, it looks like companies will have to submit documentation for their e-cigarette devices and products to the FDA this summer, she said.

The FDA did take an important step recently when it prohibited the addition of flavors—fruit flavors, chocolate, etc.—to some e-cigarette products, such as the Juul brand. Once those already in stock have been sold, they will be flavor-free. Eck said she hopes that will reduce the attractiveness of vaping for youth.

E-cigarette use is less common among people over 25, Eck said. Adults sometimes switch to vaping to help them stop smoking. While vaping may be safer than smoking, that hasn’t been determined for sure. And, if an individual continues to use both tobacco and e-cigarettes, “the risk stays the same as a cigarette, or may even go up,” she said.

## Changes in federal and state tobacco laws

In December, President Trump signed legislation that immediately raised the federal minimum age for the sale of tobacco products from 18 to 21 years. It is now illegal for a retailer to sell any tobacco product—including cigarettes, cigars and e-cigarettes—to anyone under 21. Retailers in the state began complying with the federal law right way, posting notices about the new federal age limit in stores and training their employees to not sell tobacco products to anyone under the age of 21.

“Retailers jumped on it early,” Byron Oedekoven said, because they didn’t want to be subject to large federal fines.

The legal age for selling or purchasing tobacco in Wyoming will change to 21 on July 1, when three bills passed by the 2020 Wyoming Legislature are set to become law.

Senate File 50 states that a person must be 21 years old to buy or sell nicotine products.

“That aligns us now with the federal statute,” said Rep. Steve Harshman, R-Casper, who currently serves as speaker of the house.

Eckerdt, who served as president of the Wyoming Sheriffs and Chiefs Association last year, said he was glad to see the bills pass. But he had hoped the legislature would back off the nicotine content requirement for e-cigarettes to make the state statute inclusive of any vaping device, regardless of its contents.

“How are my guys going to know whether vaping devices have nicotine?” he asked. “You have to have probable cause before you can seize it, and have it tested to find out whether nicotine is involved.”

Another bill, Senate File 42, requires age verification for buying nicotine products online and when they are delivered.

“That’s really important, because that’s been a loophole in the federal law,” Rep. Harshman said.

And House Bill 73 established a 15-percent sales tax for e-cigarettes and other nicotine products. That was accomplished by adding and expanding definitions to include nicotine products in the existing state statute that taxes tobacco products.

“Now we will tax them identical to the way we tax cigarettes and cigars and other dry tobacco products,” Rep. Harshman said. “I think this is a big deal. It will make a difference going forward.”

Rep. Dan Zwonitzer, R-Cheyenne, said he rejected that pro-

posed amendment because the purpose of HB 73 was to include e-cigarettes and other nicotine products in the state statute that taxes tobacco. “The purpose of [HB] 73 was to create an equal taxation, not to be a backdoor approach to raise the tax,” he said.

Rep. Zwonitzer is co-chairman of the House Revenue Committee, and co-chairman of the Legislature’s Joint Interim Revenue Committee, which vetted the nicotine bills during committee hearings statewide over the past year.

Rep. Kost said he is pleased that e-cigarettes and other nicotine products are now included in the state’s tobacco tax law, but disappointed that they are all taxed equally.

Because an e-cigarette or a refill vial can contain as much nicotine as the amount in a pack of cigarettes, a flat across-the-board tax results in a lower overall tax rate for e-cigarettes and nicotine products than traditional tobacco products, he said.

“I wanted those to be taxed at 7.5 percent per milliliter,” Rep. Kost said.

Rep. Zwonitzer said that proposal was too complicated to deal with in the bill that passed this year. But he said it is likely that the legislature will take up the issue of raising taxes on tobacco, e-cigarettes and nicotine products next year.

Jason Mincer said the tax on e-cigarettes should be much higher. “Nearly 36 percent of Wyoming teens use e-cigarettes; now is not the time to give e-cigarettes a tax break,” he said.

A higher tax would help prevent youth from using tobacco or nicotine products. “Youth are particularly price-sensitive,” Mincer said.

## Prevention

In Wyoming, prevention efforts for tobacco, nicotine, alcohol, opioids and other drugs now operate at the county level. Last year, the Wyoming Legislature provided two-year prevention grants to each county, and county commissioners were to distribute that funding locally and oversee prevention efforts.

The Park County commissioners have a memorandum of understanding with Cody Regional Health as the fiscal agent, along with Wendy Morris to run prevention efforts, since she was already doing the job through her employment in the Wellness and Prevention Office.

Commissioner Jake Fulkerson serves as the Park County Commission’s liaison to Healthy Park County, which meets monthly, and Morris reports to the commission quarterly.

## CURBING TOBACCO USE

Jason Mincer of the Wyoming Chapter of the American Cancer Association Cancer Action Network recommends these best practices for tobacco use prevention:

- Raising taxes on tobacco and nicotine (Wyoming has one of the lowest tobacco and nicotine taxes in the nation).
- Passing comprehensive smoke-free laws that include bars, restaurants, casinos and any other place outside of a private home.
- Adequately funding a state tobacco prevention and cessation program. He said Wyoming funds its tobacco cessation and prevention program at about one-third of the rate recommended by the CDC.

Fulkerson said Morris “hit the ground running” while most other counties were still assessing what to do. She recently updated the county commission on youth and vaping in the county.

“Boy, this vaping thing is just crazy,” Fulkerson said.

Morris said her prevention work is facilitated in large part by partnerships in Park County communities. She coordinates Healthy Park County with support from school administrators and teachers, police chiefs in Powell and Cody, school resource officers, health care workers and community members.

“These are the folks that are overseeing these efforts, and hopefully will move the needle a little bit,” Morris said.

She also works closely with the Hannah Eck’s office at the Wyoming Department of Health to provide services to anyone who wants to quit smoking or vaping.

Eck said the Wyoming Quit Tobacco Program provides access to coaches and free coaching sessions. It also provides free nicotine replacement therapy for 12 weeks and medication to help with cravings and irritability, if participants have a prescription from their doctors.

The “My Life My Quit” program does the same, but in a format that better connects with youth, Eck said.

Morris said she also is fortunate to have a very engaged law enforcement community. “Many of my colleagues around the state don’t have the same relationship with law enforcement that we have in Park County,” she said.

Powell Police Officer Trevor Carpenter serves as the school resource officer at Powell High School.

Carpenter said the vaping problem at the high school was more obvious last year than it is this year, but he believes that is because students have gotten smarter about not doing it at school.

“We use the education route,” Carpenter said. “When I talk with students, I tell them tobacco is finally less popular, then tobacco companies come up with vaping. I tell them not to fall into that trap.”

If a student is caught vaping for a second or third time or more, “it kind of ties our hands. They need to see the judge,” he said.

Carpenter said he asks students who vape whether they think they are addicted or just experimenting. “Most say it’s just something to do ... but a few will say they think they are addicted,” he said. He gives those students a packet with information about the “My Life My Quit” tobacco and nicotine cessation program for youth, and hopes they follow through.

“I tell them my door’s always open if they need to talk,” he said.

Carpenter said recent articles about students going into hospitals and having lung problems seem to have made some students aware that vaping is dangerous. “But it doesn’t seem to be recognized by other students,” he said.

Carrie Pacileo has a message for anyone who is thinking of smoking, using tobacco or vaping: “Don’t do it. You’ll save a lot of money, and you’ll feel a lot better.”

“When you’re 45 years old and you can’t kick it, it’s not cool anymore,” she said.



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