



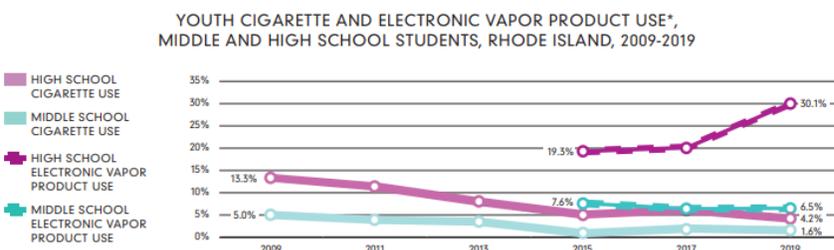
Rhode Island Public Health Brief

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Risks and Benefits of Flavored E-cigarettes

Background:

Electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) are used by both youth and adults. In 2019, 30.1% of high school students in Rhode Island reported using electronic vaping products in the past 30 days (see figure)¹ and in 2018, 5.5% of adults were current e-cigarette users.² The influence of flavorings (i.e., tobacco, menthol, fruit and other flavors) on e-cigarette use is multifaceted. Flavors may impact both youth and adult e-cigarette use and preferences. Understanding how flavored e-cigarette use is related to youth initiation, adult cessation, and nicotine dependence is critical for guiding policy.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Health, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2009-2019.
Notes: *Use is defined as currently smoking cigarettes or an electronic vapor product at least one day during the 30 days before the survey. **Electronic Vapor Use was not asked on the YRBS survey before 2015.

In 2007, the World Health Organization Study Group on Tobacco Product Regulation published a report that expressed growing concern regarding flavored tobacco products.³ This report called for regulations to prohibit tobacco products with exciting and candy-like flavors from being marketed to “young and novice smokers.” Although flavors other than menthol were banned from combustible cigarettes, the recommended regulations did not apply to e-cigarettes. By 2014, nearly 7,800 different e-cigarette flavors were marketed.⁴

The Regulatory Status of E-Cigarette Flavors

In 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the sale of all flavored e-cigarette cartridges, with the exception of tobacco and menthol flavors. This enforcement action required tobacco manufacturers to seek premarket authorization to bring flavored products back on the market.⁵ This enforcement included requirements aimed at preventing access by minors and to stop marketing of any flavored e-cigarette cartridge targeted to minors or whose marketing is likely to promote use among minors. In enforcing these regulatory changes, the FDA cited evidence of youth use of electronic nicotine delivery system (ENDS) products.

In response to the FDA 2020 regulatory enforcement actions, market sales of menthol-flavored e-cigarettes increased 82.8% in 8 weeks following the ban.⁶ Paradoxically, banning all flavored e-cigarettes without also banning flavors in all other nicotine and tobacco products may lead to e-cigarette users switching to other products where flavors are still available, including more dangerous products such as combustible cigarettes.⁷ For example, these regulations apply to pod- or cartridge-based products (e.g., JUUL) but not to self-contained, disposable vaping devices (e.g., Puff Bar) whose popularity among high school students increased rapidly following the ban.⁸ In July 2020, the FDA formally notified manufacturers of self-contained vaping devices that they were in enforcement violation for not having received premarket authorization, which will likely lead to the devices coming off the market.⁹ Also missing from regulations are e-liquids flavors designed for older third generation refillable e-cigarette cartridges, often referred to as ‘tank systems’ or ‘mods.’

Accordingly, the American Lung Association has called for Rhode Island's elected officials to reduce tobacco-related harms. Components of their comprehensive plan include removing flavored tobacco products from shelves and addressing loopholes.¹⁰

Balancing Risks and Benefits: Youth and Young Adult Use and Adult Cessation

Flavors play an important role in young people's decisions to use e-cigarettes¹¹, as flavors are used at initiation of e-cigarettes for the majority of youth.¹² Among current e-cigarette users ages 18-34, 58% of current smokers report flavor-related motives.¹³ Further, youth who use non-tobacco flavors are more likely to continue vaping and vape more heavily after six months.¹⁴ For this reason, advocacy groups and the American Academy of Pediatrics endorse flavor bans to reduce harms to youth.¹⁵

In contrast, imposing legislative restrictions on flavors may have the unintended consequence of undermining harm reduction efforts for both youth and adult smokers.¹⁶ For example, San Francisco's recent flavor ban was associated with more than doubled odds of recent smoking among underage high school students relative to other California districts¹⁷. Flavor availability increases the likelihood that young adult smokers would select e-cigarettes over other potentially more harmful nicotine and tobacco products¹¹. Further, adults who use flavored e-cigarettes are more likely to stop smoking than those who used unflavored products.¹⁸ In the U.S., e-cigarettes are now the leading product used to assist adult smokers trying to quit.¹⁹ As such, promoting the substitution of combustible cigarettes for flavored e-cigarettes in conjunction with behavioral support among adult smokers may facilitate smoking cessation²⁰, a priority for the Rhode Island Department of Health.²¹

There is a need to find policy solutions that minimize the availability of e-cigarette flavors for youth, while maintaining access for adult smokers who want to quit. Because the impact of vaping on combustible cigarette smoking is central to evaluating its public health impact, understanding how flavored e-cigarette use is related to smoking initiation and cessation across different subgroups is critical to guiding policy.

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