

Is the Smoke Worth It?

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By Calyx Stover

At least three out of every ten Hampton University students use some type of vaping device, the same kind that has killed dozens of users in the United States and sickened hundreds of others.

Vaping has become one of the biggest health concerns involving teens and young adults, and Hampton health care workers are determined to protect students.

"We have to look at how the use of e cigarettes among young adults has sky rocketed," says Megan Hill, a health education specialist at Hampton University.

Hill urged students to call help hotlines, contact the Ex program on campus which helps smokers quit, or call her directly.

Vaping companies have made their product enticing to students, Hill said.

The appeal includes the small amount of odorless smoke the vaping device emits, making it easy to use in public without public knowledge. Vapes are also small and easy to conceal because they appear to be a flash drive or other school supply. They are often thin, flat, long and wrapped in metal.

At a cost of \$35 to \$50, devices provide high doses of nicotine in flavors appealing to young people including bubblegum, mango, mint and watermelon. One JUUL pod is equivalent to a pack of cigarettes and one THC oil cartridge used for dab vapes is equivalent to a gram of weed.



Photo courtesy of www.juul.com

Students on campus say vape devices are easy to obtain from smoke shops. Students older than the required minimum age of 21 will buy them and resell cartridges and pods to classmates as a small business.

"Vaping is super easy and convenient. Most people on campus hear about it from a friend who helps them get the vape and the cartridges or pods," said Jayla Poindexter, a junior psychology student.

A side-by-side comparison shows that cigarette and JUUL ads send similar messages about the portability, taste, appearance and "cool factor" of the products. JUUL's ads are nearly identical to tobacco companies, according to

research by Stanford University.

A small study, conducted at Hampton University, showed that two out of every four vape users were not smokers before they began vaping indicating that many students are forming new unhealthy habits with vapes.

"Vaping is being marketed as an alternative smoking sensation to help customers quit, but research is showing that people partaking in vaping were not smokers before," Hill said.

While JUUL Labs insists that their products are marketed toward and meant to be used by adults, Stanford's study of the company's marketing campaign between JUUL's launch in 2015 and fall 2018 indicates that the startup was intentionally targeting youth.

"These vapes are advertised everywhere that young people go," said Hill.

Most gas stations near Hampton University's campus sell everything needed for a JUUL. There are also three smoke shops within a five-mile radius of the campus, so dab pen devices are easily accessible to students as well. Several lawsuits have been filed against JUUL claiming the product marketing has caused use to skyrocket in minors. In one, plaintiffs allege the company's use of social media targeted minors with visually appealing ads, according to The Washington Post.

The company is being investigated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for similar reasons.

"I found out about vapes on Instagram because I would constantly see ads. Next thing I knew, I would always see people smoking them on campus and at parties," one student said."

JUUL acknowledges there is a problem.

"The numbers tell us underage use of e-cigarette products is a problem. We must solve it," CEO Kevin Burns said in a post to the company's website.

The FDA's investigation has resulted in restrictions on the sale of flavored e-cigarettes and an age verification process for those who visit e-cigarette websites, both of which have been implemented in the state of Virginia.

"It's kind of hard to tell if the new bans and initiatives will work, but they are a start and it takes time to see change," said Hill.