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Vaping may harm the lungs

New toxicity data show why the inhaled vapors may prove toxic

BY

[JANET RALOFF](#)

[BETH MOLE](#)

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You've seen them on television, in celebrity photos and in magazine ads — cool superstars vaping on electronic cigarettes. Their high-tech gadgets seem to be available everywhere, from shopping malls to the 24-hour convenience mart. Is it any wonder that teens are being tempted to try out the vaping craze?

Yet scientists are disturbed by the fascination teens have with this nicotine-dispensing alternative to smoking. And with good reason. Data from a growing number of studies indicate that electronic cigarettes are not harmless.

Chemicals in e-cigarettes can damage lung tissue, provoking inflammation. That damage can reduce the ability of the lungs to keep out germs and other harmful substances, new studies show.

Yet teens seem largely unaware of — or unconcerned by — the emerging data on these risks. Their use of e-cigarettes has now surpassed that of conventional cigarettes. In the past year alone, e-cigarette use by U.S. middle-school and high-school teens has tripled. That's the finding of a new government survey released last month.

Mitch Zeller directs the Center for Tobacco Products in Silver Spring, Md. It's part of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "I can say definitively," Zeller says, "that nicotine is harmful to the developing teenage brain. And no teenager, no young person, should be using any tobacco or nicotine-containing products." These include e-cigarettes, he adds.