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## Survey of Adults' Perceptions of E-Cig Safety Yields Surprise

— Many now think vaping is at least as harmful as smoking

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Adults in the U.S. increasingly think electronic cigarettes are as harmful as combustible cigarettes, if not more so, according to findings from two multiyear national surveys.

In the Tobacco Products and Risk Perception Surveys (TPRPS), with several thousand respondents each year from 2012 to 2017, the proportion perceiving e-cigarettes to be as harmful as cigarettes increased from 11.5% (95% CI 10.0%-13.2%) to 36.4% (95% CI 35.1%-37.7%) over this interval, reported Jidong Huang, PhD, of Georgia State University in Atlanta, and colleagues.

And in the Health Information National Trends Surveys (HINTS), which had roughly 2,500 respondents each year covering the same period, the proportion went from 46.4% (95% CI 44.5%-48.3%) in 2012 to 55.6% (95% CI 53.7%-57.5%) in 2017, according to the [group's report in JAMA Network Open](#). (Wording of questions and survey methods differed between the two surveys, which likely accounted for the differences.)

Although the long-term health effects of e-cigarette use are still not known, the consensus reached among researchers and the public health community within the last few years is that cigarette smokers who switch completely to vaping can derive significant health benefits.

This was a key finding of a [National Academies committee report](#) on the public health consequences of e-cigarettes published early in 2018.

But as use of Juul and other e-cigarettes by middle- and high-school students and young adults has skyrocketed over the last few years, the main focus of public health messages has been to curb youth use of the products, said Huang.

The epidemic rise in vaping among teens and young adults may have eclipsed efforts to get the message out to adult smokers who do not want to quit or cannot quit that e-cigarettes are a safer alternative to smoking, he told *MedPage Today*.

"E-cigarettes may be useful for helping adult smokers quit, but if we have a message targeting adult smokers [that] the risk is that more teens may start using these products, that would be really bad," he said.

Other findings included that, in the HINTS survey, 2.8% of respondents believed e-cigarettes were more harmful than cigarettes in 2012, compared to 9.9% in 2017.

Also, one-quarter of TPRPS respondents in 2017 indicated that they did not know the

relative risks of e-cigarettes and cigarettes.

In an [editorial published with the study](#), Stanton A. Glantz, PhD, of the University of California, San Francisco -- an outspoken critic of tobacco in all forms, including e-cigarettes -- called the increasing perception of harm from e-cigarettes "a good thing."

He argued that since the National Academies' report was published a year ago, research has accumulated pointing to the potential and actual harms from vaping. "The data are catching up with public perception," he wrote.

But Michael Siegel, of Boston University School of Public Health -- an equally outspoken advocate of e-cigarettes for harm reduction in smokers -- told *MedPage Today* that sending the message that e-cigarettes are as dangerous as cigarettes, when the weight of evidence says otherwise, is essentially lying to the public.

"Condoning the idea that we should misrepresent the risks of these products is, in my view, a little bit dangerous," he said. "In public health we have a code of conduct, and honesty and transparency are part of that code."

In a recent [blog post](#), Siegel wrote that declaring vaping to be as dangerous as smoking cigarettes is tantamount to "committing public health malpractice."

He argued that the claim that e-cigarette use is no safer than smoking "is a direct affront to each one of the 11 million adult vapers in the United States who are trying to improve their health by switching from combustible tobacco use (i.e., smoking) to the use of non-tobacco-containing, non-combusted vaping products."

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**Stanton Glantz declared no relevant relationships with industry related to this commentary.**

**Tobacco researcher Michael Siegel declared no relevant financial relationships with the vaping industry or any other tobacco product manufacturer.**

**Primary Source**

*JAMA Network Open*

Source Reference: [Huang J, et al "Changing perceptions of harm of e-cigarette vs cigarette use among adults in 2 US national surveys from 2012 to 2017" JAMA Net Open 2019; DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.1047.](#)

**Secondary Source**

*JAMA Network Open*

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