

Cancer survivor on vaping: Don't even start

Thirty years of smoking a pack-and-a-half of cigarettes per day. Breathing problems. Three trips to the emergency department. Throat cancer. Nearly losing his vocal cords. Radiation treatment. A temporary tracheotomy leading to a soft food-only diet. A stroke. Depression. Relying on oxygen and a cane daily.

For Ralph Federle of Alton, Illinois, it all adds up to one message to young people who want to start [smoking](#) or [vaping](#): don't do it.

"I wasn't really scared because I know where I'm going after I die," Federle says of the cancer diagnosis. "But just the mere thought of my family members, my daughter, my granddaughter. I have too much to live for. And so I would fight."

Federle and Karen Boyd, one of the nurse navigators who cares for him at [OSF Moeller Cancer Center](#) in Alton are among those taking notice of the latest [annual report](#) from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on young people vaping.

"Youth e-cigarette use remains an ongoing concern as the survey found that more than 2 million U.S. middle school and high school students reporting current (past 30-day) use of e-cigarettes in 2021, and e-cigarettes were the most commonly used tobacco product among students," a summary of the report reads. Students reported top reasons for using the devices: because a friend did, to ease anxiety or depression, or to get a buzz. And 16.6% of students surveyed believed intermittent e-cigarette use caused no or little harm.

At the same time, the FDA continues to [clamp down](#) on how vaping products are marketed. Some anti-vapers say featuring things like bright colors, delicious-sounding flavors and cartoons are a way vaping companies appeal to young people.

"Instead of inhaling the tobacco smoke, users inhale a vapor, and it's from a liquid e-juice," Boyd says of the differences between smoking and vaping. "It goes directly into their lungs, which then immediately circulates through the body, through their bloodstream and into their brain."

Boyd and her colleagues at the cancer center have been organizing presentations at middle and high schools about the dangers of vaping. She spoke of those presentations surrounded by some of the grisly visual aids they use with students: a model of a rotted mouth, vaping devices with leaked tar, photos of vape batteries that have exploded all over a smoker and even the cancer-causing chemical formaldehyde, which Boyd says can be found in the vapes.

Ironically, Federle says, under the advice of his doctor, he ingested some of those unhealthy things as a way to quit cigarettes.

"[The doctor] said he'd deal with the nicotine. Come to find out you can get [vapes] with no nicotine," Federle says. "I did that for a while. It helped me quit smoking cigarettes. And in a period of time, I wasn't interested in vaping anymore. I don't know if it was the cost or [something else]."

Boyd stresses taking up vaping to help quit smoking is "very rare" and should not be done without a doctor's OK. She says the big problem is the unknown amount of nicotine in the devices.

Regardless, Boyd agrees with Federle: people young and old shouldn't start smoking or vaping.

“The nicotine delivery is a huge concern because one of these small Juul pods is equivalent to one package of cigarettes,” Boyd says, holding up one popular e-cigarette brand. “You can go through one of these Juul pods very, very quickly in that vapor form. So you essentially could be smoking as much as two or three cigarette packs a day if you’re using two or three of these Juul pods.”

Federle says there were times he felt death could come at any second. In those moments, he felt so hopeless he cried. But he says he hasn’t smoked or vaped in five years, and he’s doing OK now. He takes joy in the things others take for granted, like having a voice to be able to make a telephone call.

“Do not start. I never thought this would happen to me in a million years,” Federle says as he gestures toward his oxygen pack and cane. “I never thought this would happen. And here I sit.”

His advice to people trying to quit: “Keep trying. You’ve got to quit. Because you don’t understand just how much you’ve got to lose.”

To learn more about ways to break the habit, your primary care provider should be your first conversation. You can also visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), [FDA](#) or [OSF HealthCare](#) websites. And the national quit smoking hotline is 1-800-784-8669.