Electronic Cigarettes Increasing in Popularity and Acceptability as Perception of Health Risks Remains Low

MCLEAN, Va. (October 2017) – Since the debut of electronic cigarettes in the U.S. in 2007, the use of these devices — called “vaping” — has steadily increased over the years. In fact, a 2015 study showed vaping increased among high school-age students 900 percent over four years. Studies show people are more likely to view public vaping as acceptable than public smoking, the question is why?

A new study published in Risk Analysis: An International Journal found that people’s opinions, of public vaping are heavily influenced by what they see around them, how risky they think it is and what they think about addiction.

The study, “Influence of risk perception on attitudes and norms regarding electronic cigarettes,” revealed that a person’s thoughts on how risky and potentially addictive e-cigarettes are affected their perceived acceptability of public vaping. However, people who had greater exposure to e-cigarette use were less likely to be concerned about the risks of these devices.

E-cigarettes are often regarded as more socially acceptable than traditional tobacco and smoking, particularly among college students. Many people do not view e-cigarettes as addictive and their ever-present usage in public spaces has been a positive social cue supporting their acceptability, according to the study.

To better understand how people’s thoughts and feelings influenced how risky they thought e-cigarettes are, the researchers conducted an online survey with 395 undergraduate students at a western university.

Study participants were asked whether public use of e-cigarettes should be allowed in all areas, in restricted areas or not at all at 10 separate location types. Social cues were measured by asking, “Over the last semester where have you seen others use an e-cigarette?” Participants were also asked to indicate the frequency at which they noticed vaping in five different locations. Two items also were used to measure whether people thought e-cigarettes were addictive, each on five-point agree/disagree scales.

The results showed that people with greater nicotine exposure were also more likely to accept e-cigarettes. People were also more likely to accept e-cigarettes if they viewed them as less addictive. Those who were more worried about addiction also believed e-cigarettes were riskier.
“Of importance to the college population especially, is the cohort of emerging adults that have demonstrated a strong capacity for e-cigarette experimentation and uptake in high school,” says Craig Trumbo, lead author and professor at Colorado State University. “As many of these individuals head to college there is potential for increased normalization of vaping.”

The widespread social acceptability of e-cigarettes may make it difficult for lawmakers to restrict public vaping.

According to the study, the public generally believes that these cigarettes do not pose any second-hand exposure risks. As evidence emerges, regulators will be faced with reversing strongly held perceptions in order to restrict public vaping.

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