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Editorial: The buzz about e-cigarettes

Should they be banned in public?

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Cigarettes are awful for your health. That's undisputed. But the debate over the electronic advertisement alternative known as e-cigarettes is just lighting up. Mayor Rahm Emanuel supports a ban on the use of e-cigarettes wherever smoking is prohibited, but the City Council has shown little enthusiasm for that.

E-cigarettes are battery-powered devices that heat up liquid mixtures of nicotine and other ingredients to create vapor. An e-cig smoker inhales ... then exhales, emitting a puff of white mist. Unlike traditional smokes, e-cigarettes do not contain tobacco or many of the other harmful chemicals proven to cause cancer.

There's debate, but scant evidence, that e-cigarettes pose a health risk. The main benefit of e-cigarettes is to give smokers an alternative, a way to kick the tobacco habit. Users can vary the levels of nicotine and gradually wean themselves off their addiction.

A 2009 Food and Drug Administration study tested two popular brands of e-cigarettes and did find carcinogens and other toxic chemicals in more than half of the samples. One sample had traces of diethylene glycol, an ingredient in antifreeze.

Another study — conducted by the Drexel University School of Public Health and funded by the Consumer Advocates for Smoke-Free Alternatives Association, a group that advocates for e-cigarettes and smokeless tobacco — found e-cigarettes pose no health threat for users or bystanders under generally accepted exposure limits. No study has provided a definitive answer, but all point to e-cigs as safer than regular cigs.

The FDA is still trying to figure out how to classify e-cigarettes. In September, attorneys general from about 40 states signed on to a letter urging the FDA to regulate e-cigarettes as a tobacco product. That would allow the agency to restrict advertising, ingredients and sales to minors. The FDA has drafted a proposed rule and sent it to the Office of Management and Budget's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs for review, but has not publicly released it.

Health effects aside, a major concern about e-cigarettes is their appeal to young people. Smoking an e-cigarette looks no different than smoking a regular cigarette. That "cool" factor is still there. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of middle school and high school students who use e-cigarettes doubled between 2011 and 2012. An Illinois law banning the sale of e-cigarettes to minors took effect on Jan. 1.

Chicago's proposed ordinance, introduced by Ald. Will Burns, 4th, and Ald. Edward Burke, 14th, is promoted as an initiative to protect children, but it would have a much wider impact. E-cigarettes

would be banned from all smoke-free environments, and stores would be required to sell them behind the counter. That ordinance has been stalled, but an ordinance that would prohibit the sale of menthol-flavored tobacco products within 500 feet of Chicago schools has been approved by two council committees.

The new state law and the city ordinance that won favor in committee focus on restricting this nicotine-delivery device to kids. And that, for now, seems like the right approach. Illinois and other states had good cause to ban tobacco smoking in public places — second-hand smoke poses a known health risk. E-cigs may be a nuisance to people who see others using them, but we're not talking about second-hand smoke.

The absence of a broad government ban doesn't mean that people puffing e-cigs will start to show up everywhere. Many businesses and agencies have set their own bans. You can't smoke e-cigarettes at the United Center, on CTA buses or trains or in Starbucks stores. Nearly all major U.S. airlines prohibit e-cigarettes on their planes. It's our sense that most e-cig users think twice about where they puff away because of public repulsion toward smoking.

New York City and a small handful of states have included e-cigarettes in their indoor smoking regulations. The Evanston City Council voted to ban e-cigarettes in its smoke-free zones.

There's likely to be a renewed push in Chicago, and perhaps in the Illinois legislature, for a broad ban on e-cigarette use in public. Let's learn more; there's no reason to rush. Keep the focus on the prohibition of sale to minors.

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