Vaping Marijuana - Innovative Or Reefer Madness?

By ACSH Staff — September 9, 2015

Since its inception, the American Council on Science and Health has been trying to eliminate smoking. In the early days, that involved outreach and awareness and a certain amount of sympathy because it is an addiction.

But after two generations of outreach and awareness and sympathy, smoking has become, in the words of American Council on Science and Health President Hank Campbell, something of an IQ test. You have to be truly stupid to take it up.

Yet there are still moments, when we are lamenting the decline in intelligence in young people who take up smoking no matter how hard we try, that we have to admire their ingenuity. For example, now all of the best cold medication has to be kept behind the counter at the pharmacy because clever young people learned how to reverse engineer cold medicine into drugs.

And now they are a bit older and have shown they can turn e-cigarettes into a tool for "vaping" marijuana - they get the high without the harmful carcinogens in the smoke.

A Yale survey revealed that a number of e-cigarette users (up to 27 percent) are using "vape pens" for heating marijuana oil or wax, rather than nicotine. They discovered that hash oil and even specially-prepared cannabis (THC, tetrahydrocannabinol, the active ingredient in weed) can be aerosolized and inhaled, like a joint, using commonly available vaporizers or especially-tailored "mods" (modified personal vaporizers), all without the smoke and off-putting smell that makes your intelligence seem 20 points lower and your career prospects seem far less promising.

The paper in Pediatrics [1] was based on an anonymous survey and was administered by a group from Yale University's Departments of Psychiatry and Emergency Medicine, led by Meghan Morean, Ph.D. In the spring of 2014, over 3,800 Connecticut high school students responded to a questionnaire about their vaping and smoking habits. The results: Rates of vaporizing cannabis were high among lifetime e-cigarette users (18.0%), lifetime cannabis users (18.4%), and lifetime dual cannabis and e-cigarette users (26.5%).

Should we be concerned? As Dr. Morean said in their statement [2], "The smell of vaping marijuana isn't as strong as smoking it, plus the similarity in appearance of hash oil and nicotine solutions make this a really inconspicuous way of using marijuana."

Those sound reasonable, if it is cessation for people addicted to marijuana, but "vaping" concentrated liquid forms of marijuana can be much more potent than smoking dried leaves. So unlike nicotine e-cigarettes, which have less nicotine than a cigarette, vaping marijuana has more narcotic than the combustible form. Some concern has to be warranted if that turns out to be true.

It's faint praise, but vaping cannabis is still going to be safer than smoking it - and both of those are
safer than smoking cigarettes.