

It saves lives vs. it kills: Georgia's debate around access to vaping



Vaping proponent David Higginbotham works in the vape lab of his Gwinnett County business Higgy Cigs on Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2020, in Lilburn. Higginbotham says vaping helped him escape a potentially fatal cigarette addiction. CURTIS COMPTON / CCOMPTON@AJC.COM

David Higginbotham says vaping may have saved his life, but Amy Sedgwick says it nearly ended her teenage son's.

The two Atlantans represent the national debate swirling around the nicotine-delivery devices, which have surged in popularity, even among high school and middle school students.

Georgia lawmakers are [engaging in that debate](#). They are hearing from people such as Higginbotham, who say vaping helped them drop cigarettes, which are known killers. They've also heard stories by opponents such as Sedgwick, a nurse backed by doctors who've seen an alarming uptick in teens suffering from severe illness after vaping. They say too little is known about the long-term consequences of the product, but enough is known to restrict sales, especially to young people.

The two sides are at odds. They agree youths shouldn't have access, but disagree about details such as whether to ban flavors — mint and menthol are the most popular — which are attractive to both adults and youths.

The American Medical Association has called for a moratorium on sales, and Massachusetts has become the first state with significant prohibitions on flavor sales. The White House, prodded by the controversy, has imposed a partial ban effective Thursday, but it has so many loopholes that the American Lung Association told the Washington Post recently that [it is "a joke."](#)

In Georgia, the Medical Association of Atlanta is hosting [an event at North Atlanta High School](#) Friday evening to warn about medical issues associated with vaping and the effect on youths. And the General Assembly is considering legislation. [Senate Bill 298](#) would establish minor criminal penalties for sales to, and possession by, people under age 21 (the current minimum age is 18). [House Bill 864](#) would introduce a sales tax.

[RELATED ! Committee backs Georgia bill targeting e-cigarette sales to minors](#)

Higginbotham, who leads the Georgia Smoke Free Association, an alliance of vape shops, manufacturers, distributors and consumers, said he'd still be a smoker and a likely candidate for lung disease if he hadn't discovered vaping. He sings in choral groups and said dropping cigarettes improved his voice.

"I was a stupid teenager and most smokers were. Most of us started when we were 15 years old. We had a rebellious moment, not realizing it was something we couldn't come back from," said Higginbotham, of Gwinnett County. He discovered vaping a decade ago and has not smoked since. He was so enthusiastic that he started making his own vaping liquid at home, eventually creating an online business with the woman who became his wife. When they were dating, he helped her quit smoking in one night by introducing her to vaping.

Sedgwick, a nurse in Forsyth County, has a completely different story involving a teenager and nicotine. Her son didn't bother with cigarettes and went straight to vaping, consuming copious quantities [until both of his lungs collapsed](#) last summer. Without hospital intervention — doctors had to thrust a breathing tube through his ribs without anesthesia — he might have died. They stapled his lungs closed so they would hold air. Then, just before Christmas, when he was in school taking a test, his left lung started leaking, and he had to rush to the emergency room where his mom works, at Northside Hospital Forsyth.

"He's still angry at the vape industry for making this stuff in the first place," Sedgwick said. Her son, a high school senior who doesn't want his name published, could suffer another lung collapse. He is only considering colleges near hospitals.

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Higginbotham acknowledges vaping isn't necessarily safe. He just thinks it is "safer" than the alternative, a cigarette habit that [kills about half a million](#) Americans a year. He said other methods, such as nicotine patches, are a poor substitute.

He points to a [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report](#) in January that says most of the recent injuries and deaths connected with electronic cigarettes and vaping ([2,711 hospitalized and 60 dead](#) across the nation as of Jan. 21) were connected with products containing THC, the chemical in marijuana that delivers a high. Many who vape were relieved upon hearing that, thinking that off-the-shelf vaping liquid is therefore safe.

However, the CDC says the information behind its assessment is unreliable for a variety of reasons, including flaws in the data collection process. Unadulterated nicotine vapes could also be sickening people, it says.

"Therefore, while the investigation continues, CDC recommends that the best way for persons to ensure that they are not at risk is to consider refraining from the use of all e-cigarette, or vaping, products," it says. That recommendation extended to smokers trying to quit, urging them to try other cessation methods.

Experts say vapes deliver nicotine so efficiently that youths are becoming addicted, and sickened, in unprecedented numbers.



Amy Sedgwick's son recovers from lung failure at Northside Hospital Forsyth in July 2019. The high school senior from Gwinnett County doesn't want to be identified, but his mother wants people to know about the dangers of vaping. His lungs had to be sealed with staples after blisters on their surface popped, opening holes that caused them to collapse. While suffering from nicotine withdrawal in the

hospital, he disclosed that he had been vaping heavily for six months. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY THE FAMILY

Dr. Tina Shah was among the doctors who helped craft the AMA's call for a moratorium due to the uncertain risk of vaping. She got started five years ago, as the product was exploding on the market. It has been evolving and gaining in popularity so quickly that the research on its effects cannot keep up.

"We know that putting anything in your lungs is bad, so we know vaping is bad, but we still don't know what the whole effect is," said Shah, a pulmonary and critical care physician and a medical director at WellStar Health System. She said the evidence that it is a useful cessation device is wanting and that nicotine, in the high concentrations made possible by vaping, is harmful.

Shah became concerned about vaping when she lived in Chicago and babies started arriving in her hospital with potentially fatal nicotine overdoses. They had been exposed by simply touching the liquid in vaping devices. "I hate these things," she said. "I think they should be off the face of the earth."

EVENT PREVIEW

The Medical Association of Atlanta will present a public forum on vaping risks at 7 p.m. Friday. North Atlanta High School, 4111 Northside Parkway NW, Atlanta. [facebook.com/events/3398442323560131/](https://www.facebook.com/events/3398442323560131/)