

Georgia lawmaker seeks new curbs on vaping



In this Friday, Jan. 18, 2019 file photo, a customer blows a cloud of smoke from a vape pipe at a local shop in Richmond, Va. Although e-cigarettes aren't considered as risky as regular cigarettes, new research published Monday, May 27, 2019, finds a clue that their flavorings may be bad for the heart.

Georgia may move toward limits on vaping, as the 2020 legislative session gets underway and the number of associated deaths and illnesses rise.

Sen. Renee Unterman, R – Buford, introduced legislation Wednesday that seeks to raise the minimum age to purchase vapor products to 21. The current age limit is 18. [Senate Bill 298](#) would also require schools to teach about vaping and smoking, in addition to alcohol and drugs.

“This bill is all about protecting our children from the harmful effects associated with the use of vaping products,” Unterman said in a written statement.

The state House of Representatives has already held hearings about vaping that were triggered by a wave of fatalities and illnesses linked to the products.

House Health and Human Services Chairwoman Sharon Cooper, a Marietta Republican, said at [a hearing in early December](#) that she expected legislation to cut down on underage use of e-cigarettes, pointing to the landmark 1998 legal settlement between the states and the tobacco industry. It required companies to stop targeting children with flavored tobacco products.

“If you are really concerned about young people not becoming addicted, why should we not follow (the example) and make this tobacco product the same as cigarettes?” Cooper said last month.

Proponents of vaping say it is an alternative to deadly cigarettes, and manufacturers like Juul, have stopped selling flavored vaping products that appeal to minors.

At the time of that hearing, the Georgia Department of Public Health was reporting 35 vaping-associated illnesses, four of them fatal. Those numbers have since risen, [to 41 illnesses and six deaths](#), part of a nationwide phenomenon. A similar rise took place across the country, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention releasing [updated figures](#) this week: as of Tuesday there were 2,688 "hospitalized e-cigarette, or vaping, product use-associated lung injury" cases or deaths in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. There were 60 deaths in 27 states and Washington, D.C., with the ages of the dead ranging from 15 through 75 and the median at 51 years.

That hearing followed one in November, when state representatives heard from a Forsyth County physician about a heavily-vaping teen who had to have his [ribs pried open in an emergency procedure](#) after both of his lungs collapsed.

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The White House has gotten involved since then.

A couple weeks ago, after vacillating on the issue, the Trump administration announced [new regulations prohibiting](#) the sale of some flavored e-cigarettes popular among teens, but allowing exemptions for others.

U.S. Food and Drug Administration officials said the ban would include fruit, candy, mint and similar flavors from small, cartridge-based e-cigarettes favored by young people.

Menthol and tobacco-flavored e-cigarettes, along with large, tank-based vaping devices which are mostly sold in vape shops that cater to adult smokers, were to remain on the market, though.

Vaping advocates say the products can help adults break from a lifetime of smoking, with all of its known dangers.

Longtime smoker Keith Gossett told Cooper's committee last month that he expects to die from his old habit, but the Columbus vape shop owner said [he hopes his switch to vaping will extend](#) his life.

"I offer your smoking constituents a way out," he said.

A professor of medicine from the University of Louisville contended that vaping is "vastly safer" than smoking, but critics of vaping say the relatively new product hasn't been studied well enough to know about all the effects on health. Research indicates that risks could include harm to hearts and [developing brains](#).

Late last year, the American Medical Association called for [an immediate ban](#) on all e-cigarette and vaping products.

Meanwhile, youth vaping has been skyrocketing. A [CDC estimate](#) last year said 27.5% of high school students and 10.5% of middle school students reported using e-cigarettes within the past 30 days. The number of kids using was up about 1.7 million over the prior year, exceeding 5 million.

In addition to the age restriction and education mandate, SB 298 would prohibit the sale of any vapor product lacking a printed label of ingredients and any vapor product with packaging "made to be attractive to minors."

Unterman, who has a background in nursing, said she was prompted by the direction taken by Washington.

“I am following President Trump’s lead,” her statement said. It said her bill is “all about protecting our children from the harmful effects associated with the use of vaping products” and that the bill puts “safety nets” in place “by increasing the age required to purchase these products and prohibiting these companies from using deceptive advertising to appeal to minors”

In the absence of state or federal leadership, some local governments have been passing their own restrictions.

Alpharetta city leaders [in October](#) passed a law limiting where shops with more than 10% of sales from cigars, cigarettes, vape or tobacco can be located. Atlanta lawmakers [passed legislation](#) banning smoking and vaping inside the city's airport, restaurants, bars, workplaces and many other public locations.

Milton leaders [voted in March to discourage new vape shops from opening](#) in that city and in December discussed further restrictions.

In November, Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker signed into law [the first state ban](#) on the sale of flavored tobacco and vaping products.