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Metro Atlanta mom terrified as vaping son struggles with lung failure



Amy Sedgwick's son recovers from lung failure at Northside Hospital Forsyth in July 2019. The 17-year-old 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

By Ty Tagami

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Amy Sedgwick could hear her son wailing as they pried his ribs apart.

A surgeon at Northside Hospital Forsyth needed to push a pencil-thick breathing tube into his chest. With one lung deflated, and another barely functioning, he might suffocate without it.

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“All of a sudden, our whole lives are just turned upside down,” she said.

Vaping-associated injuries are being reported across the country, with 31 cases in Georgia so far, including three deaths.

It started for this family on July 6 when Sedgwick who was at work got a call from her daughter who was home on college break. Her brother was complaining that he couldn't breathe. He felt like he was having a heart attack.



With so many products on the market that look like USB drives or other inconspicuous things, parents, teachers and school administrators have a tough time knowing what to look for when keeping vaping devices from underage users. We purchase products from vaping stores near schools and online and put together a visual quiz of sorts. (Tyson Horne / tyson.horne@ajc.com)

Sedgwick is a wound care nurse at Northside. She knows young, healthy people don't often have heart attacks, so she told them to go to an urgent care center. They did, and her daughter called again from the road: Her brother's left lung had collapsed, and they were headed to Northside's emergency room.

Sedgwick was puzzled, as were her son's doctors. Young lungs don't typically collapse.

While recovering at the hospital, he was sweating, shaking and vomiting. He said he thought his skin was peeling off, and asked if he was dying. He knew he was suffering through nicotine withdrawal — he'd tried to break his addiction before — and admitted what was happening: He'd been vaping for more than a year, heavily the past six months. His earnings from his pizza restaurant job had been feeding his habit.

They went home to Gwinnett County after four days, but within a day, Sedgwick got another call, this time from her son's lung doctor, a co-worker.

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"Amy, your son has a right collapsed lung," Sedgwick remembers her saying. "I said, 'You mean left.' She said, 'No, right.'"

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His left lung was still recovering and marginally functional, and now his right one was gone, putting him at risk of suffocation. Sedgwick was on duty that day, and heard her son's screams from outside the surgical room. She paced outside, reminding them to check his heart rate.

"It's hard to go through this when your kid is 17 years old," she said.

The lung doctor told Sedgwick that in her 21 years of practice, she had never seen both lungs of a teenager collapse without the trauma of, say, a car crash.

Sedgwick said the doctors told her that they believe her son's vaping caused his lungs to collapse.

The vaping industry has positioned their product as a safe alternative to cigarettes. Leaders at popular brand Juul recently [stopped selling most of its flavors, stopped social media advertisement](#) and offered \$100 in incentives for retailers to use its new age-verification system to prevent sales to minors.



Signs on the counter at the Plum Food Mart in Springfield, Ohio inform customers that they must be 21-years-old to purchase tobacco and vaping products as of Wednesday, Oct. 16, 2019. In Georgia, the age limit is 18, and the medical community wants it raised to 21. BILL LACKEY/STAFF

Critics claim the industry has intentionally hooked a new generation on nicotine. A rash of injuries and deaths across the country in recent months led the American Medical Association to call for a ban on the sale of the products. Georgia medical associations are also concerned.

Dr. Justine Henao, an internal medicine doctor at Sedgwick's hospital, testified in early November to a group of Georgia lawmakers convened to address what they termed the "vaping crisis." She told them vaping was the common thread behind a rash of collapsed lungs at her hospital. In her dozen years there, she'd never heard of a case like Sedgwick's son's, but in the past few months, she said, there had been four.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says more than 1 in 4 high school students this year reported vaping in the past 30 days, as did 1 in 10 middle school students. The

numbers are rising fast, with 5.3 million middle and high school students saying they vaped this year, an increase of about 1.7 million from last year.

Henao told lawmakers that students are exposing themselves to concentrations of nicotine that wouldn't be possible with cigarettes. "Kids are having nicotine withdrawals. That's crazy to me," she said.

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Dr. Tracey Henry, speaking for the American College of Physicians, said the roughly 15,000 vape flavors (they come in everything from mango to "unicorn poop") appeal to youths while exposing them to harmful chemicals, such as volatile organic compounds, diacetyl (used to make popcorn flavoring) and lead. Vaping can undermine developing brains, affecting mood, decision making and impulse control, she said.

Sedgwick and her husband have medical bills exceeding \$180,000. Their son is back home, and though he avoids activities like skateboarding and dirt biking, for fear of what could happen should he fall, he is more or less back to normal.

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Sedgwick worries about his future, though. What will happen to him as a consequence of the surgery? The top of his lungs were permanently stapled to seal them so they could inflate and function normally. What will the vaping chemicals that Sedgwick said seared his lungs do to him over the long term?

A former oncology nurse, Sedgwick has watched people die of lung cancer.

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"They drown in their own phlegm," she said.

She wants the federal government to end the sale of vapes.

"I want parents to know that their kids can die," she said. "It needs to be banned."

About the Author



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Ty Tagami is a staff writer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Since joining the newspaper in 2002, he has written about everything from hurricanes to homelessness. He has deep experience covering local government and education, and can often be found under the Gold Dome when lawmakers meet or in a school somewhere in the state.

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