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Vitamin E Acetate Could be the Vaping Illness Culprit

By Sara Brown J.D. Candidate 2022 | November 12, 2019

The CDC has announced a potential link between the various vaping-related illnesses that have recently occurred and the additive vitamin E acetate. As of November 5, 2019, there have been 2,051 of these illnesses reported since the outbreak began in mid-August. Upon testing samples from the lungs of a group of infected people, the compound seems to be a possible link— the first traces were found in August but are reoccurring as a consistent thread in the lungs of sick patients. The compound was found in all 29 of the samples that researchers have tested.

Vaping related illnesses carry unknowns for researchers, akin to when the risks of cigarettes to human health were still obfuscated. While most patients who have reported illnesses report vaping THC or nicotine products, the concern about vaping and the illness that have occurred is not necessarily unique to THC or nicotine devices. Instead, the concern should reach all vape products. Of the 29 samples tested, 23 also showed THC in the samples and 16 showed nicotine.

The heart of the problem is, as these recent tests are illuminating, the various additives in the products. This issue is amplified by the fact that many of these products are being purchased on a black market and, thus, are entirely unregulated. Regulation would allow for the opportunity to monitor additives and ensure dangerous compounds stay out of legally purchased products.

Vitamin E acetate is described by the CDC's Dr. James Pirkle as "enormously sticky." This means it can stay in the lungs long after use and this is why its reappearance in the tests could mean it is a central cause in the vaping related lung illnesses. While vitamin E in its other forms like lotion and supplements is harmless and even beneficial, inhaling the "oily" substance is a different story.

Of the reported vaping related illnesses, 70% are male and 79% are under 35. Thankfully, there has been a significant decline in reported sicknesses, but this should not dwarf our concern or our search for a solution.