While the federal government and state legislatures are debating how much control to exercise over the new e-cigarette market, poison control centers across the nation are reporting an increase in calls related to the relatively new product. The primary source of concern is the nicotine-based liquid refill for e-cigarettes and accidental access by young children.

Nationally, poison control centers report a 161 percent rise in calls related to e-cigarettes. According to the National Poison Data Center, 365 cases were referred to a hospital in 2013, double the year before.

Specific state data include:

- In Utah, 79 children have been sent to hospitals since January 2012 after using e-cigarettes. The numbers are on the rise, according to a recent AP report.
- Minnesota Poison Control System says reports of children and teens being poisoned by e-cigarette fluid rose sharply in 2013. Calls increased from 5 in 2012 to 50 in 2013, the Star Tribune reports.
- Calls to a poison control center in Arizona linked to e-cigarettes more than doubled from 2012 to 2013, according to an Arizona television report.
- In Kentucky, the regional poison control center reports a 333 percent increase in calls, from 9 in 2012 to 39 in the first eleven months of 2013.

E-cigarettes and the “e-liquid” refills remain largely unregulated. The poison control centers point out the packaging is not child-proof and that the nicotine refill liquid can be flavored in a way that may appeal to young children. Ingesting small amounts can be harmful to young children, leading to vomiting and worse. Too much can be lethal. The nicotine also can be absorbed through the skin according to physicians.

The Federal Food and Drug Administration has said that it plans to regulate e-cigarettes but so far has not issued any regulations. Some states and cities have started to pass restrictions, including age limitations for purchase and use. The science around e-cigarettes is still developing and experts are currently debating whether they are harmful, whether they are a helpful tobacco cessation product, and whether they are a gateway to traditional tobacco for young users.

The $1.5 billion e-cigarette market is a tiny fraction of the overall tobacco industry in the U.S., however, Bloomberg Industries predicts that e-cigarette sales could surpass traditional tobacco products by 2023.

By: Debra Miller

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