

California's New Flavored Tobacco Law Will Save Kids' Lives

by Dr. Bonnie Halpern-Felsher

(NAPS)—As a parent, researcher, and professor of adolescent medicine at Stanford University, I know first-hand how important it is to keep vapes out of the hands of teens. A key part of my research focuses on understanding why kids and young adults make certain decisions around their health and how they perceive risk—including things we know to be harmful, such as tobacco use.

In my research, I often hear young people say they never would have started using tobacco if flavored products had not been so easily available. In fact, we know that kids start using and keep using tobacco because of flavors. In California, 96% of all kids who vape use flavored vapes.

I am proud Californians took an important step in ending the youth tobacco epidemic by voting "Yes" on Proposition 31, California's flavored tobacco law, which stops tobacco retailers from selling most flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes and flavored vapes.

Californians also importantly voted "yes" to including mint and menthol products in this policy. This is key in preventing adolescent tobacco use because we know that when one flavor is not around, teens will switch to other flavors. In fact, one study found that the share of adolescents using menthol cigarettes rose by over 7% in response to a previous ban on flavored cigarettes that did not include menthol.

California's flavored tobacco law addresses the root cause of the youth vaping epidemic, and the lifetime of addiction and vaping-related diseases teens are facing today.

The health risks of vapes are substantial and are the cause of many, sometimes lethal, physical health harms. To name just a few, vape use is associated with:

- Increased risk of chronic diseases, such as asthma, COPD, emphysema, and bronchitis;
- Harmful changes in adolescents' brain cell activity in the parts of the brain responsible for attention, learning, and memory;
- Worsening mental health symptoms, including anxiety, irritability, and impulsivity.

The tobacco industry's deceptive marketing tactics—colorful packaging, slick tech, and sweet flavors—trick kids into thinking vaping is safe, instead of



Eliminating the enticing flavors that Big Tobacco uses to addict the next generation of users brings us one big step closer to creating a California where youth can enjoy the physical and mental benefits of a tobacco-free life.

the reality that Big Tobacco is sentencing them to a lifetime of addiction. Flavors mask the harshness of tobacco and hide high nicotine levels, making them more addictive than traditional cigarettes. In short, the tobacco industry created highly addictive, kid-friendly products designed to exploit young people and hook California's next generation.

Importantly, the new law does not criminalize an individual for purchasing, using, or possessing a flavored tobacco product, but instead places responsibility on tobacco retailers and their employees to comply. In this way, the law affirms what I have found to be true in my research time and time again: When it comes to nicotine addiction, youth need support, not punishment.

Adolescents who no longer have access to their preferred tobacco products need to know they do have access to compassionate quit support. If you know a young person who is addicted to nicotine, it is important to be their partner and guide them towards the many resources available to help them quit.

In California, we have Kick It California, which is a free program that provides people with the tools they need to quit tobacco. We also have resources through our Tobacco Prevention Toolkit.

With support and compassion from parents, teachers, and medical professionals, we can help our young, loved ones live a healthy, tobacco free life.

• Dr. Halpern-Felsher is the Marron and Mary Elizabeth Kendrick Professor in Pediatrics II at Stanford University.