5 Things You Need to Know About E-Cigarettes

Sales of E-Cigarettes Are Expected to Top $1 Billion This Year

By LIZ NEPORENT

Sept. 24, 2013—

The electronic cigarette was invented in the 1960s, but it didn't really take off until a decade ago. Currently, there are more than 250 brands of "e-cigarettes" available in such flavors as watermelon, pink bubble gum and Java, and in more colors than the iPhone 5C.

The Tobacco Vapor Electronic Cigarette Association estimates about 4 million Americans now use battery powered cigarettes. They project sales of the devices to cross the 1 billion mark by the end of this year. Here, a look at the e-smoke trend, the good, the bad and the unknown.

E-Cigarettes Explained

What are e-cigarettes?

E-cigarettes are battery operated nicotine inhalers that consist of a rechargeable lithium battery, a cartridge called a cartomizer and an LED that lights up at the end when you puff on the e-cigarette to simulate the burn of a tobacco cigarette. The cartomizer is filled with an e-liquid that typically contains the chemical propylene glycol along with nicotine, flavoring and other additives. The device works much like a miniature version of the smoke machines that operate behind rock bands. When you "vape" -- that's the term for puffing on an e-cig -- a heating element boils the e-liquid until it produces a vapor. A device creates the same amount of vapor no matter how hard you puff until the battery or e-liquid runs down.

E-Cigarettes Explained

How much do they cost?
Starter kits usually run between $30 and $100. The estimated cost of replacement cartridges is about $600, compared with the more than $1,000 a year it costs to feed a pack-a-day tobacco cigarette habit, according to the Tobacco Vapor Electronic Cigarette Association. Discount coupons and promotional codes are available online.

**E-Cigarettes Explained**

**Are e-cigarettes regulated?**

The decision in a 2011 federal court case gives the Food and Drug Administration the authority to regulate e-smokes under existing tobacco laws rather than as a medication or medical device, presumably because they deliver nicotine, which is derived from tobacco. The agency has hinted it will begin to regulate e-smokes as soon as this year but so far, the only action the agency has taken is issuing a letter in 2010 to electronic cigarette distributors warning them to cease making various unsubstantiated marketing claims. For now, the devices remain uncontrolled by any governmental agency, a fact that worries experts like Erika Seward, the assistant vice president of national advocacy for the American Lung Association. "With e-cigarettes, we see a new product within the same industry -- tobacco -- using the same old tactics to glamorize their products," she said. "They use candy and fruit flavors to hook kids, they make implied health claims to encourage smokers to switch to their product instead of quitting all together, and they sponsor research to use that as a front for their claims. Thomas Kiklas, co-owner of e-cigarette maker inLife and co-founder of the Tobacco Vapor Electronic Cigarette Association, countered that the device performs the same essential function as a tobacco cigarette but with far fewer toxins. He said he would welcome any independent study of the products to prove how safe they are compared to traditional smokes. The number of e-smokers is expected to quadruple in the next few years as smokers move away from the centuries old tobacco cigarette so there is certainly no lack of subjects," he said.