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KEEP E-CIGARETTES AWAY FROM TEENS

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Electronic cigarettes, those hip new cigarettes that blow a thick white vapor rather than smoke, are clearly less harmful than real cigarettes.

But that doesn't mean e-cigarettes are harmless.

And until we know something different, that's how we ought to treat them.

Folks who are wary of e-cigarettes — battery-operated nicotine inhalers that do not produce smoke — are going after them on two fronts. This group includes Mayor Rahm Emanuel, New York's city council, other municipalities and states as well as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The first is a no-brainer: keeping e-cigarettes out of the hands of teens and pre-teens. We cheer on efforts to do that in the city of Chicago and at the national level.

E-cigarettes don't burn tar or tobacco, removing the risk of exposure to carcinogens in cigarette smoke. But they contain nicotine and the risks there, particularly to young people, are well documented. Nicotine is highly addictive, can impact the development of young brains, raises the heart rate and is one of the elements of smoking associated with heart disease.

E-cigarettes are being marketed aggressively to young people and come in flavors clearly meant to entice, such as bubble gum, pina colada and cherry. It appears to be working: between 2011 and 2012, use among middle and high school students more than doubled, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. The risks of young people getting hooked on e-cigarettes and then switching to the more noxious traditional cigarettes are all too real.

Fortunately, Illinois already has joined about half the states in banning the

sale of e-cigarettes to anyone under 18, effective Jan. 1. The FDA appears poised to take action across the country, with the agency noting with “great concern” the rise in youth e-cigarette usage. The wisest course is to ban the sale or marketing to anyone under 18.

The Chicago City Council could take that a step farther under an ordinance introduced last week. The mayor proposed prohibiting the sale of menthol and flavored tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, within 500 feet of Chicago schools, up from 100 feet.

The mayor also wants to ban the smoke-less cigarettes anywhere that regular cigarettes are banned, including virtually all of indoor Chicago expect homes and cars, and at least 10 feet from business entrances. This is the second front that critics of e-cigarettes are pursuing. New York City will consider a similar ban this month.

This one is a little trickier but not by much. Without smoke, the risks to non-smokers nearby are clearly diminished. But the risks are not eliminated — there is concern that nicotine and chemicals such as formaldehyde and acetone are present in the e-cigarette vapor as well as other particles that can cause heart problems.

There is only limited and preliminary research on the potential hazards of e-cigarette vapors to others, leaving us in the do-no-harm category.

Until we know the full second hand effects of smoke-less cigarettes, it's prudent to restrict them in the same way we do regular cigarettes. The City Council can and should be a forerunner in this area.

If and when the science on this questions is settled, a ban could be reconsidered.

Until then, do no harm.

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