

# The New York Times

## Lethal Liquid Nicotine

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#), The New York Times

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The Obama administration remains asleep at the switch while makers of electronic cigarettes and liquid nicotine, which is extracted from tobacco, are expanding rapidly with no meaningful regulatory oversight. As little as a teaspoon of liquid nicotine — the key ingredient in electronic cigarettes — can kill a small child and less than a tablespoon, at high concentrations, can kill an adult. Yet some vendors are offering to sell the lethal product over the Internet by the gallon or barrel, with little control over how it is handled, as [reported](#) by Matt Richtel in The Times on Monday.

Regulation is [much tighter in Europe](#) and other advanced countries. The European Parliament limits the amount of nicotine in e-cigarettes to 20 milligrams per milliliter, or a 2 percent concentration, which can cause sickness but is rarely fatal in children. It also requires childproof and tamper-proof packaging and graphic health warnings. Canada goes even further and regulates liquid nicotine and e-cigarettes under the strict rules that govern the safety of drugs; the manufacturers must submit scientific evidence demonstrating safety, quality and efficacy.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration, after three years of pondering what action to take, continues to sit on its hands and do nothing. The Food and Drug Administration has been working on ways to regulate e-cigarettes and other nontraditional tobacco products since 2011. It sent a set of proposed regulations to the Office of Management and Budget on Oct. 1, where they have languished ever since.

The use of electronic cigarettes has soared in recent years because of the claim that they allow smokers to satisfy their nicotine addictions without inhaling the tars and other toxins found in tobacco smoke. But the devices carry some risks, like extreme addictiveness for young people just starting to smoke, harmful side effects at high doses and toxic ingredients caused by quality control problems in some factories. And now the potential dangers seem to be growing. An Israeli toddler [died last year](#) after drinking from a small bottle of liquid nicotine that her grandfather used to refill his e-cigarette.

Calls to poison control centers in the United States linked to electronic cigarette liquids have increased sharply and are projected to keep climbing, according to information from the National Poison Data System. Last year, 365 of the victims were referred to hospitals, triple the 2012 number. The typical victims were young children, often attracted to the bright packaging and the fruit or candy flavorings.

The only American fatality was an adult who committed suicide by injecting nicotine, but others have been seriously injured by drinking or just coming into contact with liquid nicotine. A Kentucky woman suffered cardiac problems after her e-cigarette broke in her bed and liquid nicotine was absorbed through her skin.

It's time that the Obama administration allowed the F.D.A. to propose rules and begin taking public comment. The F.D.A. should limit the amount of liquid nicotine in any container sold to consumers, stop sales on the Internet, require childproof packaging and ban labels and flavorings that appeal to children. It will be crucial to prohibit the sale of liquid nicotine in very high concentrations; 10 percent and 7.2 percent solutions are widely available on the Internet and are lethal even in small quantities.

With evidence of this public health hazard mounting, the administration needs to get moving before more people are harmed.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/25/opinion/lethal-liquid-nicotine.html>