

Results of E-cigarette Practices in Primary Care survey June 2017

The Illinois Academy of Family Physicians (IAFP) and Cook County Department of Public Health (CCDPH), the state-certified public health authority for nearly all suburban Cook County, conducted a survey on E-Cigarette practices for primary care providers. The purpose of the survey was to garner a better understanding of physician knowledge, perception and practices related to e-cigarettes in the primary care office. E-cigarettes are in wider use now, and primary care physicians have an important role in counseling patients appropriately on the risks and uses of these products. The 2017 survey goal is to better identify gaps in current knowledge and needs for education and educational materials.

This assessment has been made possible, in part, with funding from Illinois Department of Public Health.

Demographics

The E-cigarette Practices in Primary care survey was open from May 25 - June 25, 2017 and was completed by 207 medical professionals. 86% of the providers that completed the survey were family physicians. The other 14% were comprised of pediatricians (1%), internists (2%), nurse practitioners (2%) and others (10%), including medical students, emergency medicine, surgery, tobacco specialists and dentists. 89% of those surveyed were MD's or DO's.

Out of those surveyed, 49% worked in an academic medical center or residency program, 21% worked in a community health center or FQHC, 20% in a medical corporation, and 19% were employed in a medical practice. Only 11% were in private practice. Although the survey was targeted to suburban Cook County, it was open to all demographics and 4% of those surveyed were in a rural practice. 28.50% of those surveyed indicated that 10% or more of their practice were Medicaid patients.

Discussing e-cigarettes with patients

When asked how often providers ask about e-cigarette use when obtaining a *social* history, almost 68% reported only "sometimes" or "never" asking, while 13% reported "always" asking. Most reported asking about nicotine, smoking, or tobacco use but not specifically e-cigarette or vaping. When asked particularly about discussing e-cigarette use while taking a *smoking history*, 39% of the providers reported "sometimes" discussing it, 32% reported "always" or "often" asking, and 28.5% reported "never" asking. Many providers commented that they consider e-cigarette as part of the "tobacco use" conversation.

When discussing e-cigarettes with patients, 8% of the providers believed that the discussion would encourage use of e-cigarettes or vaping devices while 67% believed it would not. The results were almost the same when asking if they believed discussing e-cigarettes with children or adolescents would encourage patient use. 73% did not think this would encourage children or adolescent patients, 7% agreed it would encourage use, and 20% were unsure. One physician commented "depends on the research, but in the same vein, discussing condoms doesn't promote high risk sex, though DARE programs have been found to increase drug use".

Documentation

When asked if their Electronic Medical Record had a place to document e-cigarette or vaping, 57.5% reported no and 27% reported unsure. Only 15.5% of providers surveyed indicated having a space in their EMR to report e-cigarette or vaping. Most providers commented that they use the “other” field in their EMR to report this, or document under “tobacco.” 66% of providers indicated that if there was a designated field in their EMR to document e-cigarette or vaping devices, they would be more likely to ask their patients about their use.

Beliefs surrounding the safety of e-cigarette use

Providers were asked how harmful they believed e-cigarettes were to a person’s health. 37% believed e-cigarettes were “very harmful,” 54.4% believed them to be “somewhat harmful,” and 2.5% indicated they were “not harmful.” 6% of the respondents admitted to being “unsure.” The general comments surrounding this is that the “direct risks are unclear,” “there is not enough cumulative evidence,” and the “long term effects are not known yet.”

Regarding the safety of e-cigarettes versus conventional tobacco cigarettes, 37% believed e-cigarettes to be safer, while 39% believed them not to be. 24% reported being unsure and again noted that there needs to be more research in this area. When asked if e-cigarettes were safer than using chewing tobacco, 38% of the providers reported “yes,” 35% reported “no” to being safer and 29% reported being “unsure..”

64% of the providers surveyed indicated that they believed e-cigarettes could be a gateway to other tobacco use, while only 39% believed it would be a gateway to other illicit drugs such as marijuana.

91% of the 207 surveyed responded that more studies on e-cigarettes and their potential use should be conducted. 80% indicated that they believe e-cigarettes and vaping devices need more regulation by the FDA.

E-cigarettes as a smoking cessation tool

Providers were asked if they thought e-cigarettes should be regarded as a type of smoking cessation treatment. 51% of those surveyed said “no,” 27% were “unsure,” and 22% said “yes” to e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation treatment.

Some providers commented that they would “prefer that my patients who smoke cigarettes transition to e-cigarettes” and “for my heavy smokers I have seen some improvement in COPD when switching to e-cigarettes”. While others commented that “it’s not the best smoking cessation treatment. Nicotine inhaler are already out there, expensive and I don’t think any more successful than other means,” and “until we have good evidence that e-cigarettes are effective in smoking cessation from other tobacco products, I would not specifically recommend them.”

Knowledge & questions regarding e-cigarettes and vaping

62% of providers said that they “sometimes” do not know the answer to a patients question regarding e-cigarettes or vaping, 20% reported “never” knowing the answer, and 13% reported “always” or “often” knowing the answer.

The present knowledge level of e-cigarettes and vaping versus the desired knowledge level

	Very High	High	Average	Low	Very Low
Present knowledge level	1%	12%	52%	29%	6%
Desired knowledge level	23%	50%	25%	2%	0%

When asked what questions providers had regarding e-cigarette use and vaping, the top answers were the need for more research, long term health risk, links to lung cancer, safety of heating elements, inhalants, and, vapor, and the effectiveness as a cessation tool.

The consensus of this survey indicates that physicians are looking for more research and information regarding the use of e-cigarettes and vaping devices, as well as patient safety.