E-Cigarette Use Among Youth and Young Adults: A Report of the Surgeon General

2016

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Public Health Service
Office of the Surgeon General
Rockville, MD
Message from Sylvia Burwell
Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

The mission of the Department of Health and Human Services is to enhance and protect the health and well-being of all Americans. This report confirms that the use of electronic cigarettes (or e-cigarettes) is growing rapidly among American youth and young adults. While these products are novel, we know they contain harmful ingredients that are dangerous to youth. Important strides have been made over the past several decades in reducing conventional cigarette smoking among youth and young adults. We must make sure this progress is not compromised by the initiation and use of new tobacco products, such as e-cigarettes. That work is already underway.

To protect young people from initiating or continuing the use of e-cigarettes, actions must be taken at the federal, state, and local levels. At the federal level, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)—under authority granted to it by Congress under the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009—took a historic step to protect America’s youth from the harmful effects of using e-cigarettes by extending its regulatory authority over the manufacturing, distribution, and marketing of e-cigarettes. Through such action, FDA now requires minimum age restrictions to prevent sales to minors and prohibits sales through vending machines (in any facility that admits youth), and will require products to carry a nicotine warning.

We have more to do to help protect Americans from the dangers of tobacco and nicotine, especially our youth. As cigarette smoking among those under 18 has fallen, the use of other nicotine products, including e-cigarettes, has taken a drastic leap. All of this is creating a new generation of Americans who are at risk of nicotine addiction.

The findings from this report reinforce the need to support evidence-based programs to prevent youth and young adults from using tobacco in any form, including e-cigarettes. The health and well-being of our nation’s young people depend on it.
Foreword

Tobacco use among youth and young adults in any form, including e-cigarettes, is not safe. In recent years, e-cigarette use by youth and young adults has increased at an alarming rate. E-cigarettes are now the most commonly used tobacco product among youth in the United States. This timely report highlights the rapidly changing patterns of e-cigarette use among youth and young adults, assesses what we know about the health effects of using these products, and describes strategies that tobacco companies use to recruit our nation’s youth and young adults to try and continue using e-cigarettes. The report also outlines interventions that can be adopted to minimize the harm these products cause to our nation’s youth.

E-cigarettes are tobacco products that deliver nicotine. Nicotine is a highly addictive substance, and many of today’s youth who are using e-cigarettes could become tomorrow’s cigarette smokers. Nicotine exposure can also harm brain development in ways that may affect the health and mental health of our kids.

E-cigarette use among youth and young adults is associated with the use of other tobacco products, including conventional cigarettes. Because most tobacco use is established during adolescence, actions to prevent our nation’s young people from the potential of a lifetime of nicotine addiction are critical.

E-cigarette companies appear to be using many of the advertising tactics the tobacco industry used to persuade a new generation of young people to use their products. Companies are promoting their products through television and radio advertisements that use celebrities, sexual content, and claims of independence to glamorize these addictive products and make them appealing to young people.

Comprehensive tobacco control and prevention strategies for youth and young adults should address all tobacco products, including e-cigarettes. Further reductions in tobacco use and initiation among youth and young adults are achievable by regulating the manufacturing, distribution, marketing, and sales of all tobacco products—including e-cigarettes, and particularly to children—and combining those approaches with other proven strategies. These strategies include funding tobacco control programs at levels recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); increasing prices of tobacco products; implementing and enforcing comprehensive smokefree laws; and sustaining hard-hitting media campaigns, such as CDC’s Tips from Former Smokers that encourages smokers to quit for good, and FDA’s Real Cost that is aimed at preventing youth from trying tobacco and reducing the number of youth who move from experimenting to regular use. We can implement these cost-effective, evidence-based, life-saving strategies now. Together with additional effort and support, we can protect the health of our nation’s young people.

Thomas R. Frieden, M.D., M.P.H.
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Preface
from the Surgeon General

E-cigarette use among U.S. youth and young adults is now a major public health concern. E-cigarette use has increased considerably in recent years, growing an astounding 900% among high school students from 2011 to 2015. These products are now the most commonly used form of tobacco among youth in the United States, surpassing conventional tobacco products, including cigarettes, cigars, chewing tobacco, and hookahs. Most e-cigarettes contain nicotine, which can cause addiction and can harm the developing adolescent brain.

Compared with older adults, the brain of youth and young adults is more vulnerable to the negative consequences of nicotine exposure. The effects include addiction, priming for use of other addictive substances, reduced impulse control, deficits in attention and cognition, and mood disorders. Furthermore, fetal exposure to nicotine during pregnancy can result in multiple adverse consequences, including sudden infant death syndrome, altered corpus callosum, auditory processing deficits, effects on behaviors and obesity, and deficits in attention and cognition. Ingestion of e-cigarette liquids containing nicotine can also cause acute toxicity and possibly death if the contents of refill cartridges or bottles containing nicotine are consumed.

This report highlights what we know and do not know about e-cigarettes. Gaps in scientific evidence do exist, and this report is being issued while these products and their patterns of use continue to change quickly. For example, the health effects and potentially harmful doses of heated and aerosolized constituents of e-cigarette liquids—including solvents, flavorants, and toxicants—are not completely understood. However, although e-cigarettes generally emit fewer toxicants than combustible tobacco products, we know that aerosol from e-cigarettes is not harmless.

Although we continue to learn more about e-cigarettes with each passing day, we currently know enough to take action to protect our nation’s young people from being harmed by these products. Previous reports of the Surgeon General have established that nearly all habitual tobacco use begins during youth and young adulthood. To prevent and reduce the use of e-cigarettes by youth and young adults, we must work together as a society. We must implement proven prevention and education strategies. Health care providers, parents, teachers, and other caregivers should advise youth about the dangers of nicotine and discourage tobacco use in any form, including e-cigarettes. They can set a positive example by being tobacco-free and encouraging those who already use these products to quit. Free help is available at 1-800-QUIT-NOW or http://www.smokefree.gov. Preventing tobacco use in any form among youth and young adults is critical to ending the tobacco epidemic in the United States.

Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A.
U.S. Surgeon General
Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the general direction of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health.


Thomas R. Frieden, M.D., M.P.H., Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Ursula E. Bauer, Ph.D., M.P.H., Director, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Dana Shelton, M.P.H., Deputy Director, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Peter A. Briss, M.D., M.P.H., Medical Director, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Rachel Kaufmann, Ph.D., M.P.H., Associate Director for Science, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Corinne Graffunder, Dr.P.H., M.P.H., Director, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Editors of the report were

Cheryl L. Perry, Ph.D., Senior Scientific Editor, Professor and Regional Dean, The Rockwell Distinguished Chair in Society and Health, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health, Austin, Texas.

Melissa Harrell, Ph.D., M.P.H., Senior Scientific Editor, Associate Professor, Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences and the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health, Austin, Texas.

Melissa R. Creamer, Ph.D., M.P.H., Senior Scientific Editor, Faculty Associate, Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences and the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health, Austin, Texas.

Steven Kelder, Ph.D., Senior Scientific Editor, Beth Toby Grossman Distinguished Professor of Spirituality and Healing; Associate Regional Dean; Co-Director, Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living; Professor, Division of Epidemiology, Human Genetics, and Environmental Sciences, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health, Austin, Texas.

Brian King, Ph.D., Senior Associate Editor, Deputy Director for Research Translation, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Leslie A. Norman, M.B.A., Managing Editor, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.


Contributing editors were

Thomas Eissenberg, Ph.D., Director, Center for the Study of Tobacco Products; Professor of Psychology (Health Program), College of Humanities and Sciences and Member Scientist, Massey Cancer Center, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

Rachel A. Grana, Ph.D., M.P.H., Program Director, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.
A Report of the Surgeon General

Pamela Ling, M.D., M.P.H., Professor, Division of General Internal Medicine, Department of Medicine, Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education, University of California, San Francisco, California.

Mark Parascandola, Ph.D., M.P.H., Epidemiologist, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.


Jonathan M. Samet, M.D., M.S., Distinguished Professor and Flora L. Thornton Chair, Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine; Director, Institute for Global Health, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.


Contributing authors were

Melissa D. Blank, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia.

Frank J. Chaloupka, Ph.D., Director, Health Policy Center, Institute for Health Research and Policy, and Distinguished Professor, Department of Economics, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.


Jonathan Foulds, Ph.D., Professor, Departments of Public Health Sciences and Psychiatry, College of Medicine, Penn State University, Hershey, Pennsylvania.


Maciej L. Goniewicz, Ph.D., Pharm.D., Assistant Professor of Oncology, Department of Health Behavior, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Buffalo, New York.

Rachel A. Grana, Ph.D., M.P.H., Program Director, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Lisa Henriksen, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist, Stanford Prevention Research Center, Department of Medicine, School of Medicine, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.

Jidong Huang, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist, Institute for Health Research and Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.


Frances Leslie, Ph.D., Vice Provost for Graduate Education; Dean of the Graduate Division; Professor of Pharmacology and Anatomy and Neurobiology, University of California, Irvine, California.

M. Jane Lewis, Dr.Ph., Associate Professor, Health Education and Behavioral Science and Center for Tobacco Studies, School of Public Health, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Kristy Marynak, M.P.P., Public Health Analyst, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Mark Parascandola, Ph.D., M.P.H., Epidemiologist, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Terry F. Pechacek, Ph.D., Professor and Interim Division Director of Health Management and Policy, School of Public Health, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.
Gabbi Promoff, M.A., Associate Director for Policy, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Kurt M. Ribisl, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Health Behavior, University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health; Program Leader in Cancer Prevention and Control, University of North Carolina Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

April Roeseler, B.S.N., M.S.P.H., Chief, California Tobacco Control Program, California Department of Public Health, Sacramento, California.

Jonathan M. Samet, M.D., M.S., Distinguished Professor and Flora L. Thornton Chair, Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine; Director, Institute for Global Health, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

Laura R. Stroud, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist, Centers for Behavioral and Preventive Medicine, The Miriam Hospital; Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Alpert Medical School, and Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences, School of Public Health, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Prue Talbot, Ph.D., Director, University of California, Riverside Stem Cell Center and Core; Professor of Cell Biology, Department of Cell Biology and Neuroscience, University of California, Riverside, California.

Mark Travers, Ph.D., M.S., Assistant Professor of Oncology, Department of Health Behavior and Air Pollution Exposure Research Laboratory, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Buffalo, New York.

Scott Weaver, Ph.D., M.A., Assistant Professor, Division of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Heather Rubino Althouse, Senior Regulatory Counsel, Office of Compliance and Enforcement, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

René A. Arrazola, M.P.H., Epidemiologist, Epidemiology Branch, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

David L. Ashley, Ph.D., Director, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Cathy L. Backinger, Ph.D., M.P.H., Deputy Director for Research, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Tracey E. Barnett, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Epidemiology, College of Public Health and Health Professions and College of Medicine, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

Neal L. Benowitz, M.D., Professor of Medicine, Bioengineering, and Therapeutic Sciences, Chief, Division of Clinical Pharmacology, University of California, San Francisco, California.

Jay M. Bernhardt, Ph.D., M.P.H., Interim Dean and Professor, Moody College of Communication; Founding Director, Center for Health Communication, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas.


Allan M. Brandt, Ph.D., Amalie Moses Kass Professor of the History of Medicine, Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard University Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts.

April Brubach, M.A., Director, Division of Public Health Education, Office of Health Communication and Education, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Priscilla Callahan-Lyon, M.D., Medical Branch Chief, Division of Individual Health Science, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Reviewers were

David B. Abrams Ph.D., Executive Director, The Schroeder Institute for Tobacco Research and Policy Studies at Truth Initiative, Washington, D.C.; Professor, Department of Health, Behavior, and Society, Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland; Professor of Oncology, Georgetown University Medical Center, Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center (adjunct), Washington, D.C.
Frank J. Chaloupka, Ph.D., Director, Health Policy Center, Institute for Health Research and Policy; Distinguished Professor, Department of Economics, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Li-Lun Chen, M.D., Director, Division of Individual Health Science, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Beverly Cherniak, J.D., Director, Office of Regulations, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Joanna E. Cohen, Ph.D., Director, Institute for Global Tobacco Control; Bloomberg Professor of Disease Prevention, Department of Health, Behavior, and Society, Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

Catherine G. Corey, M.S.P.H., Epidemiologist, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Kathleen Crosby, Director, Office of Health Communication and Education, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Cristine D. Delnevo, Ph.D., M.P.H., Professor and Director, Center for Tobacco Studies, Rutgers School of Public Health, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Lauren M. Dutra, Sc.D., M.A., Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education, University of California, San Francisco, California.

Lucinda J. England, M.D., M.S.P.H., Medical Officer, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Michael P. Erikson, Sc.D., Sc.M., Dean and Regents' Professor, Division of Health Management and Policy, School of Public Health, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Michael C. Fiore, M.D., M.P.H., M.B.A., University of Wisconsin Hilldale Professor of Medicine; Director, Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Madison, Wisconsin.

Neal D. Freedman, Ph.D., M.P.H., Senior Investigator, Metabolic Epidemiology Branch, Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Elizabeth M. Ginexi, Ph.D., Program Director, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Gary A. Giovino, Ph.D., M.S., Professor and Chair, Department of Community Health and Health Behavior, School of Public Health and Health Professions, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, Buffalo, New York.

Stanton A. Glantz, Ph.D., Professor of Medicine and American Legacy Foundation Distinguished Professor in Tobacco Control; Director, Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education, University of California, San Francisco, California.

Maciej L. Goniewicz, Ph.D., Pharm.D., Assistant Professor of Oncology, Department of Health Behavior, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Buffalo, New York.

Rachel A. Grana, Ph.D., M.P.H., Program Director, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Bonnie Halpern-Felsher, Ph.D., FSAHM, Director of Research, Professor, Division of Adolescent Medicine, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.

Dorothy K. Hatsukami, Ph.D., Forster Family Professor in Cancer Prevention, Masonic Cancer Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Corinne Husten, M.D., M.P.H., Senior Medical Advisor, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Frances Jensen, M.D., F.A.C.P., Professor and Chair, Neurology Department, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Ronald L. Johnson, Ph.D., Program Director, DNA and Chromosome Aberrations Branch, Division of Cancer Biology, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Sarah E. Johnson, Ph.D., Social Scientist, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.
Annette R. Kaufman, Ph.D., M.P.H., Health Scientist and Program Director, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Ryan David Kennedy, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Institute for Global Tobacco Control, Department of Health, Behavior, and Society, Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland.

Jonathan D. Klein, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.A.P., Associate Executive Director; Director, Julius B. Richmond Center, American Academy of Pediatrics, Elk Grove Village, Illinois.

Suchitra Krishnan-Sarin, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

Lauren K. Lempert, J.D., M.P.H., Associate Specialist, Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education, University of California, San Francisco, California.

Maggie Mahoney, J.D., Executive Director, Tobacco Control Legal Consortium at the Public Health Law Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Tim McAfee, M.D., Medical Officer, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Daniel McGoldrick, M.A., Vice President, Global Health Advocacy Incubator, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Washington, D.C.

Cindy Miner, Ph.D., Associate Director for Scientific Communication, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Matthew L. Myers, J.D., President, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Washington, D.C.

Linda J. Neff, Ph.D., Senior Epidemiologist, Epidemiology Branch, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Richard J. O’Connor, Ph.D., Member and Professor of Oncology, Department of Health Behavior, Division of Cancer Prevention and Population Sciences, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Buffalo, New York.

Mark Parascandola, Ph.D., M.P.H., Epidemiologist, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Terry F. Pechacek, Ph.D., Professor and Interim Division Director of Health Management and Policy, School of Public Health, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Alexander Persoskie, Ph.D., Social Scientist, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

John P. Pierce, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Department of Family Medicine and Public Health and the Moores Cancer Center, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California.

David W. Racine, M.S., Senior Program Management Officer, Office of Compliance and Enforcement, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Chad J. Reissig, Ph.D., Addiction Branch Chief, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Joelle Robinson, M.P.H., Social Scientist, Office of Science, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Jonathan M. Samet, M.D., M.S., Distinguished Professor and Flora L. Thornton Chair, Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine; Director, Institute for Global Health, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

Peter G. Shields, M.D., Deputy Director, Comprehensive Cancer Center, James Cancer Hospital; Professor, College of Medicine, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Ann Simoneau, J.D., M.B.A., Director, Office of Compliance and Enforcement, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.
Theodore A. Slotkin, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Pharmacology and Cancer Biology, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, North Carolina.

Anne Sowell, Ph.D., Health Scientist, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Erin L. Sutfin, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Vice Chair, Department of Social Sciences and Health Policy, Division of Public Health Sciences, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Robert E. Vollinger, Jr., M.S.P.H., (Dr.P.H. Candidate), Program Director and Public Health Advisor, Tobacco Control Research Branch, Behavioral Research Program, Division of Cancer Control and Prevention, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Kenneth E. Warner, Ph.D., Avedis Donabedian Distinguished University Professor of Public Health, Department of Health Management and Policy, University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Geoffrey Ferris Wayne, M.A., Research Consultant, Sebastopol, California.

Deborah M. Winn, Ph.D., Deputy Director, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Rockville, Maryland.

Mitchell Zeller, J.D., Director, Center for Tobacco Products, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, Maryland.

**Other contributors were**

Katherine J. Asman, M.S.P.H., Statistician, Biostatistics and Epidemiology Division, RTI International, Atlanta, Georgia.


Dayana Chanson, M.P.H., Research Associate to Jonathan M. Samet, M.D., M.S., Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

Tara Christine Chu, M.P.H., Research Associate to Jonathan M. Samet, M.D., M.S., Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

Stephanie L. Clendennen, M.P.H., Predoctoral Fellow, Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science on Youth and Young Adults, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health, Austin, Texas.

Sarah J. Cross, Graduate Student Researcher, Department of Anatomy and Neurobiology, University of California, Irvine, California.

Nicholas J. Felicione, Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Psychology, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia.

Kyle R. Gregory, J.D., M.S.H.A., Postdoctoral Research Associate, Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science, School of Public Health, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Emily T. Hébert, M.P.H., Doctoral Student, Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health, Austin, Texas.

Erin O’Connor Landau, M.S., Data Analyst, DB Consulting Group (Contractor), Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Pamela Lemos, M.S., Public Health Analyst, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Gerald V. [Simon] McNabb, Lead Public Health Analyst, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Washington, D.C.

Ronald L. Johnson, Ph.D., Program Director, DNA and Chromosome Aberrations Branch, Division of Cancer Biology, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

Hoda S. Magid, M.H.S., Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education, University of California, San Francisco, California.
Dale Mantey, M.P.A., Predoctoral Fellow, Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science on Youth and Young Adults, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health, Austin, Texas.

Mandie Mills, Photographer, Office of the Associate Director for Communication, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Richard Miech, Ph.D., Professor, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Luz M. Moncayo, Executive Assistant to Jonathan M. Samet, M.D., M.S., Department of Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine, Institute for Global Health, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California.

Maureen O’Brien, J.D., Staff Attorney, Tobacco Control Legal Consortium at the Public Health Law Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Patrick M. O’Malley, Ph.D., Research Professor, Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Gabriela V. Portillo, Masters Student, Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health, Austin, Texas.

Anna Teplinskaya, M.D., M.P.H., Public Health Analyst, Epidemiology Branch, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Tenecia Smith, M.P.H., Data Analyst, DB Consulting Group (Contractor), Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Kathryn E. Szynal, Editorial Assistant, McNeal Professional Services (Contractor), Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Teresa Wang, Ph.D., M.S., Epidemic Intelligence Service Officer, Lieutenant, U.S. Public Health Service, Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Jennifer Whitmill, M.P.H., Data Analyst, DB Consulting Group (Contractor), Office on Smoking and Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.
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