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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Vape Waste is Polluting our Environment and Poses Health Risks

It has long been known about the waste from single-use plastics, disposable electronics are often overlooked. With e-waste as the fastest growing waste stream in the U.S. the rate at which we freely dispose of electronics is not sustainable.

Disposable vapes stands apart as being particularly harmful to the environment. Vapes, also known as e-cigarettes, are handheld battery powered electronic devices with heated metal coils that vaporize a liquid containing nicotine or cannabis products, known as e-liquid. Nicotine is the famously addictive stimulant found in tobacco that gives smokers a dopamine high and makes quitting difficult.

Much has been made of the public health harms of disposable vapes electronic waste yet these manufactured electronics with rechargeable batteries are produced and shipped around the world. They are utilized and designed to be thrown out after use. Disposable vapes are single-use products powered by the same rechargeable lithium-ion batteries used in electric cars and iPhones. That's because while some can be recharged with a USB cable, once they run out of the included e-liquid they can't be refilled. They're wasteful, harmful, and trending.

According to the CDC Foundation following the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) February 2020 crackdown on flavored nicotine e-liquid cartridges for reusable vapes, sales of disposable brands increased 196.2% by March 2023, The FDA's decision prohibited the sale of flavored pre-filled nicotine vape cartridges exemplified by popular brand JUUL but didn't mention disposable vapes. This omission created a gray market and by March of 2020 sales of disposable products increased to 11.9 million units a month and have overtaken cartridges market share at 53% of vape sales. At this rate, 4.5 disposable vapes per second are thrown out.

Per the CDC Foundation sales estimates, lining-up the disposable vapes sold in a year would stretch for 7,010 miles—long enough to span the continental U.S. twice. This vape waste is becoming more common while cigarette butts become less common as the trash that litters our beaches and waterways. While cigarette pollution takes up to 10 years to degrade, disposable vapes are non-biodegradable and “endanger ocean creatures that inadvertently consume the plastics.”

Electronics often contain hazardous materials such as the heavy metals lead and mercury. According to the UN, “recycling activities are not keeping pace with the global growth of e-waste.” The agency's report found just 9.4% of e-waste is recycled in the Americas. It's not just a capacity problem. Technology doesn't exist to take complex products such as a disposable vape and melt them back into their component parts.

Most spent disposable vapes will never face the challenges of recycling because they aren't properly collected as e-waste. Starting in 2019, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) began accepting e-cigarette devices and cartridges during their annual National Prescription Take Back Day, although the DEA cannot accept devices containing lithium-ion batteries.

With no standard legal way to recycle disposable vapes, and the already low e-waste recycling rate of less than 10%, most of these harmful products will sadly end up in landfills or waterways after they run out of juice.

Vape waste contains plastics, electronics, and chemical waste. These disposable vapes are encased in plastic shells that never fully degrade. They follow in the footsteps of other environmentally harmful single-use pod products, such as coffee pods. Due to the nicotine e-liquid used in these products, vape waste can't be recycled with other plastics because the substance is defined by the EPA as an acute hazardous waste.

The lithium used by the batteries in the disposable vapes sold every year weighs 23.6 tons, equivalent to the lithium needed to create batteries for 2,600 electric vehicles. Tech like vapes require metals such as cobalt, platinum, gold and rare earth elements. Mining for these minerals is destructive. These metals are not infinite, and at some point, will run out.

Disposable vapes can't be reused, they can't be recycled properly, and they can't legally be thrown in the trash. What are consumers supposed to do with these products? Is it any wonder they're an environmental threat? Few products are as harmful and popular as disposable vapes. Disposable electronics, especially products that trash our environment and public health need to be addressed. Truly the best way to permanently help our environment is not to vape.

With the average age of a new smoker 13 in NYS and 90% of smokers trying it by the age of 18 it's very important to be vigilant with prevention education. It's never too early to encourage your children to make healthy choices and aspire to "Live SAFE".

The US Environmental Protection Agency and FDA recently released a fact sheet on how to safely dispose of e-cigarettes. Please visit <https://www.epa.gov/hw/how-safely-dispose-e-cigarettes-information-individuals> for more information.

For help Quitting contact the American Lung Association- Lung Helpline at: 800-Lung-USA or the New York State Smokers' Quitline at 866-NY-QUITS (866-697-8487).

SAFE, Inc. is the only alcohol and substance abuse prevention, intervention and education agency in the City of Glen Cove. Its Coalition is concerned about tobacco use and vaping seeking to educate and update the community regarding its negative consequences in collaboration with Carol Meschkow, Manager- Tobacco Action Coalition of Long Island. For more information, please visit the Vaping Facts and Myths Page of SAFE's website to learn more about how vaping is detrimental to your health at www.safeglencove.org. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove

Coalition please visit: <http://www.safeglencove.org/> and follow us on our website at: www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition.