

Cool Mint, Crème Brulee and Mango

Flavored tobacco is hooking a new generation on nicotine

By Monica Baez

As part of the newest generation, I have seen many give in to the dangers of flavored tobacco products. These deadly products cause a disruptive and unhealthy lifestyle. More than 5.3 million kids nationally use e-cigarettes, and I have seen many of my peers do it locally.

They buy more and more products every day to satisfy themselves. I see them post on social media or rant at school about smoking. They talk about all the new flavors and which ones they are going to buy once they get their allowance. One out of six Arizona high school students use e-cigarettes. Over 80% of young people who have used tobacco started off with flavored products. With 15,000 flavors to choose from, these addictive and never-ending products mask away the dangers of using tobacco.

Throughout school, I tried my best and keep away from the talk and drama of smoking, but everywhere I looked there was someone either changing their flavor pod or smoking and laughing with a group of other students. I noticed they skipped school to head to the smoke shop early. I have lost many friends due to their obsession with e-cigarettes, which I was not interested in.

But it is not just teens who are negatively affected by nicotine addiction. My grandparents and friends fell extremely ill or went to rehab from being exposed to flavored tobacco products, which led to using other dangerous drugs and habits. It is hard to see a loved one become so isolated and weak due to smoking. My family and I have tried to help them, but that person needs to realize for themselves that what they are doing is unhealthy. They have to realize how sick and weak they are becoming to get better. I used to think all you can do is wait and hope for the best.

Lung cancer and rehab are very serious. I watched my grandmother fight cancer and my grandfather battle through rehab. For them, it seemed like their troubles all started with flavored

tobacco products and led to more addictive and dangerous drugs. The amount of nicotine and the use of menthol cigarettes is so addictive, it takes a long time for someone to realize how bad they are. Their focus is only on the flavor and the constant need to be smoking.

Today, with a global pandemic, we should pay attention and protect our lung health even more. Smoking weakens the immune system and leads to high risk of respiratory infections. COVID-19 attacks the lungs, and it has been shown that smokers—traditional and e-cigarette users—are more than twice as likely as non-smokers to experience severe symptoms of COVID-19. Some smoke shops are handing out face masks when merchandise is sold. As if the masks will help. The flavored tobacco products are already weakening the lungs' functions.

Everyone falls at some point, and while it is important that family and friends help when you do, lawmakers can also help. I am tired of living in a world where every conversation includes something about heading to a smoke shop and my friends not realizing that flavored pods are dangerous. A new ordinance is going to be presented to Phoenix City Council members. The ordinance would ban the sale of flavored tobacco products. This could help protect the health of my family and friends and the future of our youth. ■



Monica Baez is a youth ambassador for the Phoenix Flavored Ban campaign supported by the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids.

