

Tobacco alternative gaining consumers and critics

By Amber Lake

For the Times-Union

Adam Vella, a 27-year-old Jacksonville native, started smoking cigarettes when he was working in the restaurant industry during college. He said he did it mainly to get in a quick break during a busy shift that felt endless.

He kept smoking long after he left that job, however. When he finally decided to quit, he said, he thought that a transition to vapor cigarettes could slowly wean him.

Vella's story is much like many smokers' stories. It starts with a quick decision and ends much later with wondering, "What's next?"

For a long time people have relied on various nicotine substitutes to ease the transition from smoking to not smoking. Patches, gum and even injections have dominated the quitting market. People have even tried plastic or dummy cigarettes to suck on while on a nicotine patch to give a real smoking feel. They've tried hypnosis.

Lately though, people have been turning to electronic cigarettes for help.

Rithrey Dale, 26, smoked for about six years before she decided to wean herself off

tobacco using electronic cigarettes. She said it took about two months.

"The e-cigs did not suffice after meals, while drinking alcohol, after a movie or any of the events that generally triggered my addiction," she said. "They did suffice for the random, very persistent triggers throughout the day and I believe that is the important factor that helped me quit in the end.

"I do believe they helped immensely in the process of quitting. I was able to cut back the amount I was smoking significantly because of e-cigs. One random day, I woke up and decided I wouldn't smoke a cigarette, or an e-cigarette, and have not smoked since then."

But controversy around e-cigarettes has been ongoing since they first hit the market. Electronic cigarettes use an atomizer that heats a liquid,

or e-juice, to its boiling point, which turns it into a mist you can inhale. Many users claim that because the inhalation is vapor, not smoke, the carcinogenic aspect of smoking is nullified.

That's not necessarily the case. The American Lung Association released a statement in August saying it, "is very

concerned about the potential health consequences of electronic cigarettes, as well as the unproven claims that

they can be used to help smokers quit. There is presently no government oversight of these products and absent Food and Drug Administration regulation, there is no way for the public health, medical community or consumers to know what chemicals are contained in e-cigarettes or what the short and long-term health implications might be."

Regardless of the perceived danger of vaping, since 2011, its use has climbed 3.4 percent in adults and 10 percent in high school students.

Ben Hughlett, president of New Leaf Vapor Company, said that the switch to e-cigarettes greatly reduces harm, and that although nicotine is not healthy "nor is a pumpkin spice latte."

And, e-cigarettes do seem to be popular. New Leaf Vapor Company has expanded its business to five locations around Jacksonville since 2008.

Hughlett said the reception to e-cigarettes has been great, but he is worried about the FDA's impending regulations. What concerns him isn't evidence suggesting the harmful

effects of vaping, but of lobbying pressure from the tobacco industry.

"The FDA is receiving tremendous pressure from lobbyists in the pharmaceutical and tobacco industries so that those industries can maintain an upper hand over the growing vapor market," Hughlett says. "If Big Tobacco is successful in squashing the emerging vapor industry, the tremendous success we've seen in terms of innovation in getting people off of traditional tobacco cigarettes is at risk of being undone."

Some people are not convinced of the merits of e-cigarettes.

Rob Thomas, a doctor and section leader of the Tobacco Prevention Program at the Tobacco Free Coalition of Jacksonville, said he has concerns regarding the sudden popularity of the product. Thomas said there is too much unknown about e-cigarettes to condone their use.

He cites the rise of use among adults, which has doubled from 2010, along with the rise of poison control calls due to ingestion of the liquid. In 2014, a state Tobacco and Nicotine Regulation bill was passed, making it illegal to sell electronic cigarettes to anyone

under 18.

Thomas said the laws and science aren't catching up to the ubiquity of the product.

"With so many unknowns about the specific health consequences, rigorous scientific studies are needed in order to provide a solid public health statement."

There are no federal laws that regulate e-cigarettes and there is very little peer-reviewed research looking at possible health effects. However, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has recorded complaints of adverse effects of vaping that include pneumonia, congestive heart failure, disorientation, seizures and hypotension.

Vella eventually quit smoking after switching to e-cigs. But it wasn't immediate. He smoked them for three years after the transition.

He said that his major issue was availability. "Whether I was at school [or] work, wherever, I could always vape."

Though he has quit, he doesn't think that being dependent on anything, organic or electronic, is good. He said he remembers it as, "the last of my bad vices."

Amber Lake is a student at the University of North Florida.