

NEWS

'My lungs were chemically burned': NJ victim speaks out against vaping

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Kerri Chonsky thought she was going to die.

It was Sept. 23, and the 21-year-old was headed to the hospital for the third time in a week.

"I called my mom, because she lives out of state," Chonsky remembered. "I begged her to come, and I said, 'I really think I'm dying now.'"

After nearly two weeks in a pediatric ICU at Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Monmouth County, where she was stabilized with oxygen and steroids, Chonsky is speaking out against the thing that nearly took her life: electronic cigarettes.

Chonsky, of Englishtown, started smoking cigarettes when she was 17 or 18, she said. Hoping to find a "safer alternative" — one that wouldn't leave a smell — she picked up a Juul, a popular electronic cigarette device, and began vaping.

"I always thought it was kind of stupid, honestly," Chonsky said. "I picked it up because I was quitting cigarettes. There are kids who just picked it up to pick it up.

"I don't see why you pick up an addiction for no reason," she added. "It's just silly."

Chonsky began using vaping devices more and more, eventually taking hits almost every 10 minutes, she said. She first had other people purchase her vapes, and she began buying them from stores and unregulated dealers as soon as she was old enough.

Two years later, what doctors first thought was pneumonia turned out to be chemical burns on her lungs — injuries that sparked shaking and cold sweats, eventually sending her to the hospital last month.

“The damage to my lungs was similar to if I had been near a chemical fire,” Chonsky said.

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Nader Nakhleh, a pediatric pulmonologist at Jersey Shore, said Chonsky’s X-rays showed a pattern he had seen before, one he said is “eerily” like others associated with vaping.

The vaping crisis continues to grow. Twenty-six people have died from vaping-related respiratory illnesses in 21 states, including one in New Jersey, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday. That includes three deaths in California, and two each in Georgia, Kansas and Oregon. The youngest was a 17-year-old boy who died last week in the Bronx, and the oldest was 75.

Meanwhile, the number of people suffering from vaping-related respiratory illnesses climbed to 1,299 this week, the CDC said — up 200 in one week. Suspected and probable cases were reported in 49 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Three-quarters of those reporting illnesses had smoked products containing THC — the compound in marijuana that produces a high — either with or without nicotine. A third reported exclusive use of THC-containing products. And 80 percent of those who became ill were younger than 35, with 15 percent younger than 18 years old. The vast majority — 70 percent — were male.

The cause of the illnesses is still not known. So far, the only recommendation from federal health officials is to avoid vaping. In particular, officials warn against using products bought “off the street” or that have been modified or whose contents are unknown. At this point, no single substance, brand or device has been found to be associated with the illnesses.

So far in New Jersey, one woman has died of a vaping-related respiratory illness and there have been 15 confirmed and eight other probable cases, the state Health Department said. The latest state report, out Tuesday, said 43 additional cases were under investigation.

“We truly are in a crisis,” said acting New Jersey Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli, who heads Gov. Phil Murphy’s Electronic Smoking Device Task Force.

Murphy and the task force have pushed the idea of banning flavored vapes in recent weeks as the crisis has intensified. They also have considered increasing penalties for unauthorized sales, creating a centralized state retail registry and prohibiting advertising and sale of products used to hide vaping devices from the prying eyes of parents and teachers.

Chonsky and Nakhleh, the pediatric pulmonologist, met again Thursday, but she didn't recognize the doctor who treated her during the scariest days of her life.

In fact, she doesn't remember much of anything that happened while she was in the ICU.

"I was in really bad shape," Chonsky said. "I owe my life to that hospital, really.

"It's not a joke," she said. "It's not worth it."

Hackensack Meridian Health on Thursday committed \$1 million from its community outreach budget to addressing the state's vaping crisis. It will devote \$750,000 to an 18-month research program, spearheading an effort in the state to understand which populations are affected most by vaping.

"It wasn't something we budgeted for," said Hackensack Meridian CEO Bob Garrett. "No one knew the vaping crisis was going to happen. But we need to step up."

Hackensack Meridian also plans to give \$200,000 to schools and community groups, such as YMCAs and Boys & Girls Clubs, for education and device buy-back programs. An additional \$50,000 will help train specialized nurses.

Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey also pledged \$100,000 to the schools program Thursday.

A framework for selecting schools to receive grants is still in the works, but Garrett said economic need is the priority, followed by preparedness for launching a program.

"There's no doubt that in the long run, this is going to be a very costly endeavor in terms of health care utilization," Nakhleh said. "Not only is it a very frightening, sort of acute medical condition, it's completely avoidable."

Chonsky was released from the hospital Monday but faces a long road of follow-up appointments and testing. Her doctors are hopeful she'll recover fully because she's young.

But although Nakhleh is optimistic about Chonsky's case, he said he doesn't know for sure what the next steps will hold.

"We don't know what to tell our patients," he said. "We don't have that information yet to say, 'You're going to be fine. It's going to be OK.'"

For now, Chonsky is taking life day by day, she said. Her legs, she added, "feel like Jello," and simple tasks like doing laundry and climbing stairs leave her winded. She got out of breath while talking to reporters Thursday.

"I have an 80-something-year-old-grandfather who has trouble breathing," she said. "I didn't think I'd be in the same position."

Chonsky was in school briefly, she said, but had to stop for financial reasons. She was interviewing for jobs before she landed in the hospital.

"Now I'm taking it easy, because there's not too much I can really do," she said. "I'm just trying to get back to who I was."

Staff Writer Lindy Washburn contributed to this article.