Letter to the Editor

The Potential Danger of Flavoring in Health Promoting and Health Compromising Products: Implications for Children

*Corey Hannah Basch1, Charles E Basch 2

1Department of Public Health, William Paterson University Wing 143, Wayne, NJ 07470, USA
2Department of Health and Behavior Studies, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, USA

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Dear Editor-in-Chief

In making food choices, children innately gravitate to foods that have a sweet flavor.1 Yet, flavorings no longer are confined to foods. For example, the sweet flavor present in candy is now widespread in children’s vitamins, and medicinal items like cough syrup. Vitamin and mineral supplements are consumed by approximately one-third of children in the United States.2 With a myriad of choices including different colors, shapes, candy flavorings, and cartoon characters, young consumers are bound to be satisfied. This, however, presents issues relevant not only to pediatricians, but public health practitioners, and, in the worst-case scenario, emergency care professionals. In 2012, there were nearly 50,000 calls to poison control centers in the United States due to children (those 5 and under) consuming excessive amounts of vitamins.3 Overconsumption of vitamins is a recognized risk, particularly with those that have such a close resemblance to candy.4 Similarly, cold and cough preparations accounted for 28,837 calls regarding pediatric exposures (those 5 and under) to poison control in 2012.3 Flavorings in these products as well often resemble candy, and no doubt, make this product more palatable. While these are products often thought of as health promoting, health professionals may overlook the possible harm of overdose simply because of the nature of the product. However, there is now an emerging concern with potential for children to be drawn to sweet flavoring and risk the possibility of being poisoned by liquid nicotine.

In recent years, e-cigarettes have been marketed as a safer way to smoke or as an adjunctive tool for smoking cessation. The FDA has not yet regulated this claims.5 Nicotine, with added flavorings and chemical components come in a liquid form referred to as e-liquid, which is inhaled as an aerosol in e-cigarettes. The amount of nicotine in e-liquid is to be decided by the consumer. It comes in varied flavors, but those of particular interest are e-vapors with flavorings, which attract children, like gummy bear, bubble gum, and cotton candy, which, similar to the children’s vitamin have a taste that is not distinguishable from candy.

1 Correspondence: Corey Hannah Basch, Tel: +1 973 720 2603; e-mail: baschc@wpunj.edu
The Centers for Disease Control, recently reported an astonishing jump in the number of calls to poison centers due to e-cigarette exposure, which was documented as exposure to the actual e-cigarette or the nicotine liquid. A total of 51.1% of these calls pertained to children under age 5. According to this report, there was an increase in calls per month for exposure to e-cigarettes, going from one call in September 2010 to 215 in February 2014. As stated previously, research suggests that innate preference for sweets is part of a child’s biology. Unfortunately, discerning whether or not the sweet product is actually a harmful one is not. Greater efforts are needed to protect children from the potential danger of potentially toxic products that mirror those that are not. The Food and Drug Administration banned the sale of cigarettes flavored like candy as part of the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, perhaps the logic underlying this law should be applied to other products that have already resulted in harm to children.

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References