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## Cigarettes, e-cigarettes and a scare

Once was a closet smoker. It wasn't that I was particularly embarrassed to be a smoker. In fact, if you asked me about it, I'd tell you I smoked a cigarette or two before I went to bed and one or two when I woke up and none in between.

While on the surface, parts of that story were correct, the numbers were slowly becoming a lie. What started out as two or three cigarettes a day became three or four, then four or five cigarettes a day and the next thing I knew, I was racing past a half pack a day to nearly a pack a day.

I had to do something.

My wife had quit smoking a few months earlier and she did it by vaping. I know this is the part where I say she used an e-cigarette, but it wasn't an e-cigarette. That's such an idiotic description of the process. She used a mod, which held the battery, which supplied the energy to heat up the e-juice, which produces the vapor which contains the nicotine. This process allows a user to safely control the heat level, which offers control over the heat of the vapor and the quality of flavor.

E-cigarettes offer none of the control of a mod and are often pretty nasty to inhale. My experiences with true e-cigarettes ended up in profuse coughing fits.

For the sake of clarity, I'll say e-cigarettes from here on out, but under protest.

Well, anyway, I digress. I had watched my wife give up the 'stinkies,' as cigarettes are called in the vaping community, in February of last year. She never complained at me or gave me a hard time about my growing cigarette addiction. And for that I loved her and realized I wanted more time on earth with her.

I don't know what it was, but by August, I started thinking about it and realized that I had a way of quitting smoking that more than likely was going to be outlawed.

At the time, I figured that e-cigarettes would be outlawed because of taxing issues. The government hadn't figured out a way to effectively tax e-cigarettes like they have regular cigarettes. And, let's face it, no politician likes any form of commerce where they can't figure out how to effectively tax it and get their cut.

As a result, I decided that while I had this avenue to quit, I was going to smoke my last cigarette September 1, 2018. And even more ironically, I decided to quit the same week I went to Las Vegas for the first time.

While Vegas isn't a place where people normally go to quit anything, it worked for me because I was doing all my smoking in my house and for a week, I wasn't even going to see my house. But I allowed myself to vape. I was actually using a salt nicotine solution, which is about 25 times more potent than most e-juice out there. I didn't do it often, but when I needed it, it worked and sated my desire for a cigarette.

I used the salt nic, as it's called, for about three weeks and then I ratcheted down to a basic .03 percent nicotine solution that most people use. I kept this routine going for about three months and was pretty happy with it. I liked chasing clouds. The flavors were interesting. I thought I was going to be vaping for the rest of my life.

The one thing I didn't take into account is that the e-juice is mainly composed of propylene glycol. While the Food and Drug Administration has concluded that PPG is mostly safe for humans, studies show that for a small percentage of people, it can aggravate mucus membranes and cause an allergic reaction.

I am part of that small group of people. I started noticing that my eyes were getting watery and itchy and were stuck together when I woke up in the morning after vaping the night before. That was really the only issue I had. But it was an issue I couldn't deal with. I work in newspapers. I need my eyes to make a living. So I had to quit.

And that's what I did. I didn't have any problems. It was far easier to quit e-cigarettes than it would have been to quit normal cigarettes.

Which brings me to what's happening today with e-cigarettes and the current scare that's going on in the media and elsewhere.

My experiences with e-cigarettes, even at their worst, were nothing that would land me in the emergency room. I couldn't figure out what the hubbub was about, so I started researching the stories where people were either dying or were finding themselves on death's

doorstep.

People are getting really sick and sometimes dying, due to vaping, but let's clarify, they are getting sick vaping marijuana products. The reason for this is simple. Making the oils for vaping marijuana is an expensive enterprise. It takes a lot of marijuana to make a little bit of that oil and some unscrupulous dealers add chemicals to their oils to stretch them a little further and make more money.

This is happening mainly in non-regulated situations in both states where marijuana is legal and illegal, where cartridges and vape pens, ordinarily produced by reputable companies are being counterfeited and sold on the black and or gray market for what amounts to a 30 or 40 percent discount.

E-cigarettes, as most people can legally buy here in good ole West Virginia, are not killing people, or heck, even making them sick. The illegal stuff is doing that.

This is all a complex issue here. Are e-cigarettes 100 percent safe? No. But, they are a lot safer than smoking regular cigarettes. In fact, so much safer that in the United Kingdom, a country that has single-payer healthcare and as a government, has to consider healthcare costs to virtually everything, officials see e-cigarettes as a blessing and a good way to help people stop smoking regular cigarettes. It's saving them money. They know that people who use e-cigarettes are less likely to get cancer or emphysema or any of the other costly diseases associated with tobacco. It's called harm reduction.

But on the flip side, e-cigarettes are new and haven't really been researched and there is a danger present in that none of us really know what the long-term effects may be.

But we know what the long-term effects are to smoking tobacco, and that is a scary thought.



Justin Griffin is the managing editor for *The Spirit* and hasn't smoked a cigarette in 418 days. He hasn't vaped since January of this year.

