
PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY
SEVERE ACUTE PULMONARY DISEASE ASSOCIATED
WITH CANNABIS OR CANNABIDIOL OIL
AUGUST 15, 2019

Current Situation

Since June 2019, at least 7 cases of severe acute pulmonary disease in previously healthy adults were reported from a Kings County hospital. Cases were among residents of multiple counties. The patients presented with progressive respiratory distress, sometimes initially diagnosed with pneumonia or bronchitis, and some with preceding fevers and gastrointestinal symptoms. All cases failed to respond to an initial course of antibiotic treatment. All patients required admission to the hospital with significant respiratory support, including high-flow oxygen, bilevel positive airway pressure (BIPAP), or intubation with mechanical ventilation. Diagnoses included pneumonitis and acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). Patients have improved with systemic steroids. Evaluation for infectious etiologies has been negative to date in all patients.

The Kings County Health Department is currently investigating the cause of these illnesses. All patients reported vaping in the weeks prior to hospital admission, and a reported common exposure between these patients is that they have been vaping cannabis or CBD oils. The names and types of products used remain unknown, and patient interviews are ongoing. Other states have reported recent similar cases. CDPH is supporting Kings County's investigation.

To date one suspect case has been reported to Riverside County Public Health and is under investigation.

Background

Vaping refers to the increasingly popular practice of inhaling vapor from an e-cigarette device, which works by heating a liquid that can contain nicotine, marijuana, or other drugs. The long-term health impacts of vaping are unknown. The liquids used in e-cigarettes are largely unregulated, and they can contain toxic chemicals that can cause lung damage.

Case Definition

A case is defined as meeting the following criteria:

- Severe acute pulmonary disease (including but not limited to pneumonitis and ARDS);
- Requiring admission to a hospital and respiratory support (including but not limited to high-flow oxygen, BIPAP, or intubation with mechanical ventilation);
- No infectious etiology defined;
- Recent history of vaping;
- Symptom onset on or after June 1, 2019.

Recommendations for Providers

- Clinicians are asked to remain alert for potential cases among persons presenting with severe acute pulmonary symptoms, and ask these patients about their recent history of vaping.
- If the patient has the product at hand, please collect and hold for directions from Disease Control.
- Patients were seen in primary care and initially diagnosed with pneumonia or bronchitis, but did not respond to antibiotics.
- Clinicians who become aware of cases similar to those described above are requested to report them to Riverside County Public Health. Please fax a Confidentiality Morbidity Report (CMR), the History and Physical, pertinent MD progress notes, and pulmonologist consults and chest x-ray/CT reports to 951-358-5102.

For questions call Disease Control at 951-358-5107 during business hours, after hours 951-782-2974.

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