

The Virgin Islands Consortium

95 Percent Of Vaping Products 'Tainted' By DLCA From VI Retailers And Wholesalers Found To Be Counterfeit; Mysterious, Deadly Illness Continues To Rise In USVI

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The Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs (D.L.C.A.) and the Virgin Islands Department of Health (D.O.H.) held a joint press conference on St. Croix Thursday to update the public on actions the departments have taken to address a serious public health issue created as a result of the use of counterfeit vaping devices. D.O.H. urged Virgin Islanders to stop vaping until the investigation is resolved.

Dr. Esther Ellis, epidemiologist for D.O.H., reported that as of last Friday, up to 354 possible cases in 29 states and the territories — double the number reported the prior week — have been reported. Ms. Ellis explained that the ongoing probe is serious. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (C.D.C.) is investigating.

“There is also a growing number of cases in the Virgin Islands that are being investigated,” Ms. Ellis disclosed.

The problem has been so widespread that it is being deemed an epidemic in the United States. Lawmakers across the mainland are considering either [banning vaping altogether](#), or [curbing its use](#). On Wednesday, a second person died from a severe lung illness after vaping, according to a lead investigator on the case in Oregon, the New York Times reported. The investigator said that the person had apparently become sick after vaping T.H.C. from a product purchased at a recreational marijuana shop in the state.

Richard Evangelista, commissioner of D.L.C.A., informed the public that “Operation Fake Green”, “a joint effort between D.L.C.A and D.O.H.,” was initiated on Thursday. According to V.I. environmentalists, after receiving information from D.O.H.’s epidemiology department about possibly tainted vaping products that were possibly manufactured in China and contained contaminants, the environmental health department moved forward with implementing the operation.

A task force comprised of officials from the V.I. Taxicab Commission, the V.I. Fire Service, the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources, and the V.I. Department of Justice accompanied D.L.C.A. enforcement officers and D.O.H. environmental health officers to various retail stores in both districts to confiscate counterfeit vaping products.

Retail stores, wholesale warehouses, and vape shops across the territory were inspected and as of Thursday, the task force had removed approximately 5,000 questionable vaping products from store shelves and warehouses. Approximately 4,000 of the apparatuses were confiscated on St. Thomas and approximately 1,000 on St. Croix. Of the 5,000 products confiscated, it has been confirmed by V.I. environmentalists that 95-98 percent are tainted.

Ms. Ellis explained that it is difficult to tell the counterfeit from the real product, and the only way to properly identify the fake product is to remove the cartridge from the box. “The regulated product is clear, and the counterfeit product is yellow,” she said giving an example. The color yellow does not represent all counterfeit products, Ms. Ellis clarified this morning.

“[Anyone who uses e-cigarette products](#) should not buy these products off the street (e.g., e-cigarette products with THC, other cannabinoids) and should not modify e-cigarette products or add any substances to these products that are not intended by the manufacturer,” CDC officials said Friday. E-cigarettes can contain harmful or potentially harmful substances, including nicotine, heavy metals (e.g. lead), volatile organic compounds and cancer-causing chemicals. Some e-cigarette products are used to deliver illicit substances and may be acquired from unknown or unauthorized sources.

D.L.C.A. said stores in the territory will be continually monitored to ensure that the products remain off the shelves.

Regarding the mysterious illness, the Times reported that patients, otherwise mostly healthy and in their late teens and 20s, are showing up to hospitals with severe shortness of breath, often after suffering for several days with vomiting, fever and fatigue. Some have wound up in the intensive care unit or on a ventilator for weeks. Treatment has been complicated by patients' lack of knowledge — and sometimes outright denial — about the actual substances they might have used or inhaled.

The outlined symptoms are cough, shortness of breath and chest pain, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, fatigue, fever, weight loss or other issues that can develop over several days and sometimes several weeks. The gastrointestinal symptoms sometimes precede respiratory symptoms. Suspected cases have resulted in serious lung damage, other complications and death. "As of this point there has been two deaths, one in Illinois and one in Oregon. "Our concern is the health and well-being of Virgin Islanders and D.O.H. urges everyone to stop vaping until the cause of these illnesses are identified," the epidemiologist urged.

The Consortium reported on Wednesday that there have been reports of individuals' limbs being amputated because of the mysterious illness.

Both hospitals in the territory, Schneider Regional Medical Center and Governor Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center are currently monitoring incoming patients for potential exposure to vaping.

Recommendations for the Public

1. While this investigation is ongoing consider refraining from using e-cigarette products.
2. Regardless of the ongoing investigation, anyone who uses e-cigarette products should not buy these products off the street (e.g., e-cigarette products with THC, other cannabinoids) and should not modify e-cigarette products or add any substances to these products that are not intended by the manufacturer.
3. Regardless of the ongoing investigation, e-cigarette products should not be used by youth, young adults, pregnant women, as well as adults who do not currently use tobacco products. If you use e-cigarette products, monitor yourself for symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath, chest pain) and promptly seek medical attention if you have concerns about your health. CDC and FDA will continue to advise and alert the public as more information becomes available.
4. Adult smokers who are attempting to quit should use evidence-based treatments, including counseling and FDA-approved medications. If you who need help quitting tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, contact your doctor.
5. If you are concerned about harmful effects from e-cigarette products, call your local poison control center at: 1-800-222-1222.
6. If you have a medical emergency, please seek immediate medical attention.
7. We encourage the public to submit detailed reports of any unexpected tobacco or e-cigarette-related health or product issues to the FDA via the online Safety Reporting Portal: <https://www.safetyreporting.hhs.gov>.

8. Any suspect cases can be submitted to Dr. Esther Ellis, Territorial Epidemiologist
esther.ellis@doh.vi.gov

9. Need to report to DLCA any suspected counterfeit products. Consumers can contact the Office of the Commissioner on St. Croix at 340-713-3522; St. Thomas at 340-714-3522; or on St. John at 340-693-8036; or by email consumerawareness@dlca.vi.gov

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