

The Virgin Islands Consortium

The CDC Has Announced Major Breakthrough in Mysterious Vaping Lung Illness Investigation

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday that samples of lung fluid from 29 lung injury patients in 10 states all contained the same chemical. The CDC's discovery is a major step forward in the battle to identify the cause of a mysterious lung illness caused by vaping that has caused multiple deaths across the United States, including the U.S. Virgin Islands. "There is also a growing number of cases in the Virgin Islands that are being investigated," Dr. Esther Ellis, epidemiologist for Virgin Islands Department of Health said in September.

As of November 5, 39 people have died of the injury, and 2,051 cases are being investigated.

The chemical, called vitamin E acetate is now considered a “chemical of concern” by the CDC. The federal agency said that vitamin E acetate is an oily substance found in many household items, including foods, supplements, and even skin creams.

“Vitamin E acetate usually does not cause harm when ingested as a vitamin supplement or applied to the skin. However, previous research suggests when vitamin E acetate is inhaled, it may interfere with normal lung functioning,” the CDC explained on its website.

Chemistry professor Michelle Franci [told The Washington Post](#) in September that while the oil might be good for skincare, when heated up, it can act almost like a grease. Therefore, breathing vaporized grease could badly damage the lungs, though researchers are still trying to figure out the exact mechanism that’s causing the lung damage.

Investigators believe that the substance has been added to e-cigarette products as a thickener. This, investigators believe, has been particularly attractive to people manufacturing illicit products because it resembles tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) oil. THC is the substance in marijuana that provides a high.

Vitamin E acetate was previously linked to the injuries in early September, when some state agencies identified the substance in samples of vaping products that had been used by people who later came down with the disease. But finding it in products wasn’t the same as finding it in the patients themselves.

[In this case, researchers looked at fluid](#) taken from the lungs of patients suffering from the injury, and found vitamin E acetate in every sample. THC was found in 82 percent of the lung fluid samples, and nicotine was found in 62 percent of the samples, suggesting that the vast majority of patients were vaping THC products, and that many were using both nicotine and THC products.

The CDC looked for other additives in the samples, including mineral oils and plant oils, but didn’t find anything to cause concern.

Sources: CDC, The Verge.