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REBRANDING
NICOTINE



Nicotine is the primary driver of tobacco addiction in the form of cigarettes, vapes and most other forms of commercial tobacco. The greatest health risks arise when tobacco is burned, which generates thousands of toxic substances.

PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES

Movement touts addictive drug as beneficial, but dangers persist

Hasmeena Kathuria
University of Wisconsin-Madison
THE CONVERSATION

An ironic development emerging alongside the “Make America Healthy Again” movement is the portrayal of nicotine as a wellness and performance-enhancing product. Across social media, podcasts, wellness communities and tech startups, prominent wellness personalities and other influencers are portraying nicotine as a misunderstood compound whose potential benefits have been overshadowed by its negative association with cigarette smoking.

As a result, nicotine is being repositioned from an addictive substance linked to tobacco use to a natural product that can be used for everything from improving focus to protecting against cognitive decline. This trend includes use of nicotine alone in noncombustible products such as nicotine pouches, or in combination with caffeine and nootropics, which are substances marketed to enhance cognition.

As a pulmonary physician-scientist who studies nicotine addiction and the health consequences of tobacco and nicotine products, I am concerned about claims that nicotine can enhance wellness, productivity and cognitive performance.

Distinguishing between nicotine and tobacco

Some of these claims stem from the observation that nicotine is a naturally occurring plant compound found primarily in tobacco and in nightshade vegetables such as tomatoes, potatoes and eggplant in trace amounts. Proponents of nicotine use also draw on studies suggesting that nicotine can affect certain aspects of cognition and brain function.

However, extending these findings to broad claims about productivity, brain health, longevity or wellness goes well beyond what has been shown in human studies.



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Nicotine is the primary driver of tobacco addiction in the form of cigarettes, vapes and most other forms of commercial tobacco.

The greatest health risks arise when tobacco is burned, which generates thousands of toxic substances, including carcinogens, carbon monoxide and fine particulate matter. Repeated exposure to these combustion products can cause cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease and numerous other smoking-related illnesses.

While many smoking-related diseases result from exposure to combustion products, nicotine itself has well-known negative effects on the brain and body. Nicotine activates the sympathetic nervous system – the body’s “fight or flight” response – which increases heart rate and blood pressure and disrupts sleep. Repeated stimulation of this system can place additional strain on the heart.

Nicotine exposure is of particular concern during critical phases of development. Prenatal exposure to nicotine has been associated with

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Kennedy launches new push on vaccine injuries

Ahmed Aboulenein
REUTERS

WASHINGTON – Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. last week launched an agencywide effort to study and document any health problems reported after vaccination, the Department of Health and Human Services said on Oct. 8.

The initiative is the latest step by Kennedy, who spent years questioning vaccine safety and founded an anti-vaccine group before taking office, to reshape federal immunization policy.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says childhood vaccines are studied in placebo-controlled and comparison-group trials and monitored for safety after approval.

The federal Vaccine Injury Table lists 14 compensable injuries across 16 vaccine types under the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, a no-fault system in which claimants file against the government, not vaccine makers. Since 1988, it has awarded roughly \$5 billion across about 12,300 injury and death claims.

The new moves, which appear to be part of Kennedy’s decadeslong efforts to sow skepticism about vaccines, come as he faces legal challenges to his attempts to alter U.S. childhood vaccination schedules and growing concern among public health experts about falling immunization rates, particularly against measles, which has seen a resurgence in the United States since last year.

The effort centers on a National Institutes of Health clinic opened on Oct. 5 to treat and study patients reporting health problems after receiving vaccines, HHS said in a statement.

Other measures include a proposal by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to reimburse physicians for reporting suspected injuries to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, a CDC effort to update VAERS, and HHS requiring electronic health records to capture vaccine-related adverse events.

Kennedy has said U.S. children receive too many vaccines, falsely claiming repeatedly that kids get up to 90 doses before age 18, which has been

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