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Early View

Research letter

Vaping induced metabolomic signatures in the circulation of mice are driven by device type, e-liquid, exposure duration and sex

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Vaping induced metabolomic signatures in the circulation of mice are driven by device type, e-liquid, exposure duration and sex

Authors: Alexander Moshensky[1,2], Mulong Du[3], John Shin[1,2], Ira Advani[1,2], Deepti Gunge[1,2], Denzil Mathew[1,2], Rita Alkolla[1,2], Ashley Du[1,2], Christian Javier[1,2], Lauren Ma[1,2], Albert Tran[1,2], Nicholas Nguyen[1,2], Jarod Olay[1,2], Sedtavut Nilaad[1,2], Jeffrey Ding[4], Mahan Najhawan[4], Jeramie D. Watrous[4], Christine M. Bojanowksi[1,2], Mohit Jain[4], David C. Christiani[3,5] and Laura E. Crotty Alexander[1,2,*].

Affiliations:

[1]Pulmonary Critical Care Section, VA San Diego Healthcare System, La Jolla, CA 92161.

[2]Division of Pulmonary, Critical Care and Sleep Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of California San Diego (UCSD), La Jolla, CA 92093.

[3]Department of Environmental Health, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA.

[4]Departments of Medicine and Pharmacology, UCSD, La Jolla, CA 92093.

[5]Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, Department of Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114.

*Corresponding Author: Laura E. Crotty Alexander; UCSD 9500 Gilman Dr, MC 9111J, San Diego, CA 92093; FAX: 858-646-2802 Phone: 619-438-4207 email: lca@ucsd.edu

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Key words: E-cigarette, vaping, metabolomics, inflammation, sex effects, lung injury

Introduction

Electronic (e)-cigarette devices have evolved rapidly since the modern version was introduced in 2007 [1, 2]. Inhalation of aerosols generated by these devices have been tied to multiple lung diseases, and diseases and pathology outside the lungs, while the underlying mechanisms driving e-cigarette associated pathology remain unknown [3-7]. With over a hundred vaping devices and thousands of e-liquids on the market, e-cigarettes introduce numerous chemicals first into the lung and then rapidly into the circulation due to high permeability of alveoli. While e-cigarettes can deliver the same or more nicotine than conventional tobacco [8], and nicotine is known to induce numerous inflammatory, carcinogenic and epigenetic changes, it is unknown what impact the other 30-120 chemicals in e-cigarette aeorols have on the body [9]. Because changes in metabolite profiles in the circulation have been associated with downstream health effects, plasma level changes in metabolites caused by e-cigartte inhalants may have profound effects on long term health and disease risk. Utilizing metabolomic data to assess the effects of different e-cigarette devices in biological systems may illuminate what downstream pathology is likely to occur secondary to chronic inhalation of e-cigarette aerosols.

Methods

E-cigarettes

Devices were purchased from popular online stores (Kanger Mini-protank glassomizers, 1.5Ω coils, Kanger eVOD Variable Voltage 1000mAh battery). For vape pens, 50:50 propylene glycol (PG):Glycerin (Gly) with 24mg/mL nicotine e-liquids were used (Xtreme Vaping). For Mods, 70:30 PG:Gly with 6mg/mL nicotine was made (Sigma). JUUL Mango and Mint (the most

popular flavors in 2018-2019; 30:70 PG:Gly, 59mg/mL nicotinic salts) were bought from the manufacturer.

Exposures

C57BL/6 male and female 6-8 week-old mice (Harlan) were placed in the inExpose system (Scireq) for 60min once daily or 20min three times daily. Power calculations were performed to identify sample size and found 82% power to detect a 50% increase in bronchoalveolar lavage cellularity (SD = 33%; the primary outcome for the original study) with a group size of n= 6. Thus, groups for all exposures and controls were designed with 6 mice apiece. Because we also wanted to define differential metabolites across different exposures, such as exposure pattern, e-device type, and nicotine exposure, a secondary outcome of metabolomic differences across groups was pursued. Additional power calculation was conducted, following the pipeline suggested by Jaykaran Charan et al. [10], and determined the power to be 93.3% for the sample sizes used for these metabolomic analyses. As previously described, 4-second e-cigarette aerosol puffs were generated every 20 seconds, across all devices [11-14]. Mice underwent intra-aortic blood collection, and plasma was aliquoted and stored at -80°C. All studies were conducted with UCSD Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee approval.

Metabolomics

Small polar, lipophilic bioactive metabolites were extracted from plasma samples using organic solvent followed by offline solid phase extraction (SPE) as previously described [15, 16]. Metabolites were chromatographically separated (Thermo Vanquish UPLC system, Phenomenex Kinetex C18 (1.7μm, 100x2.1mm) column), and mass spectra acquired (Thermo QExactive

orbitrap). Metabolites were identified by matching accurate mass, retention time, and MS/MS fragmentation patterns to an in-house library of commercially available standards [15, 16].

Analysis

All detected metabolites, including 9163 untargeted metabolites and 14 deuterated molecules as internal standards, were firstly standardized by ((x-mean)/sd). A simple unsupervised method, principal component analysis (PCA), was then used to evaluate and visualize the batch effect by untargeted metabolites and internal standards markers separately. The coefficient of variation (CV) of each internal standards markers was also calculated for batch effect evaluation. Unpaired student t-test was used to evaluate the difference of metabolites between two candidate groups. *P* values were two-sided and less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant because of the small sample size in each group. Pearson's correlation coefficient (*r*) was used to measure the strength of the association between two variables in the global pattern of metabolites. All statistical analyses were performed using R version 3.5.2.

Results

We utilized a nontargeted approach to detect potential small polar, lipophilic bioactive metabolites in the plasma of e-cigarette aerosol exposed mice and controls and assay a total of 9177 metabolites, including 14 internal standards markers. All samples were grouped together, indicating an absence of significant batch effects. Because each vaping device has different characteristics, in some cases including differences in e-liquids, we first assessed the metabolites within the plasma from mice exposed to individual e-device types.

E-cigarette Impact on Circulating Metabolites

Eighteen unique metabolites were identified in the plasma of vape pen aerosol exposed mice. Seventeen were lower in e-cigarette mice, with one oxylipin/eicosanoid-like metabolite (EIC_356) being elevated. Inhalation of nicotine-free (Vehicle) aerosols from Mod devices for 12-weeks led to 6 unique metabolites, while nicotine containing aerosols (EV), led to 7 unique metabolites (**Figure 1A**), with the majority being higher relative to controls. Intriguingly, comparison of EV to Vehicle identified 23 significantly different metabolites, with 22 being lower in EV, suggesting a preponderance of nicotine-independent effects. Bonferroni correction among the three groups, there still exists 12 unique metabolites ($P<0.05/3$).

Sub-acute exposure of 4-weeks led to 17 unique metabolites in Vehicle and 23 in EV, with the majority being decreased, compared to controls (**Figure 1B**). EV and Vehicle mice had 11 metabolites in common (**Figure 1B**). By merging comparisons from 4- and 12-week exposures, we identified 22 of 23 target metabolites specific for nicotine (EV) vs Vehicle, and 10 of 22 were specific for nicotine at 4-weeks of exposure. When assessing all metabolites, 270 of 345 metabolites were specific for 12-week exposure to nicotine and 113 of 272 were specific for 4-week exposure to nicotine.

Duration of Exposure

Comparing mice exposed to EV generated from Mods for 4- versus 12-weeks, there were significant differences in 47 metabolites, with 44 having higher levels at 12-weeks. When Vehicles were compared, 48 of 49 metabolites had higher levels at 12-weeks. Interestingly, only one metabolite was shared across the two comparisons (**Figure 1C**).

Flavor-Specific Changes in Metabolite Signatures

Mice whom inhaled aerosols from JUUL Mint versus JUUL Mango were found to share 1 metabolite in common, putative Beta-HC (**Figure 1D**). JUUL Mango was found to have three specific metabolites in the plasma, not found in JUUL Mint or Air controls: Eicosanoid_12,13, Putative_1-Stearoyl-2-hydroxy-sn-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine, and FFA_Heptadecaenoic Acid. When intranasally (i.n.) challenged with LPS, Air mice had 52 differentially targeted metabolites (52/271). Mice exposed daily to JUUL Mint prior to LPS challenge had 26 differentially targeted metabolites (26/271), while those exposed to JUUL Mango had 52 (52/271). Mint-LPS had 6 unique metabolites, while Mango-LPS had 26 unique metabolites, and the two groups shared 5 metabolites (**Figure 1E**). Particularly, 4 differential metabolites still exerted significance with the Bonferroni correction ($P<0.05/3$). These data suggest that daily inhalation of JUUL aerosols leads to immunomodulation such that the host's inflammatory response to a common clinical challenge is altered.

Differences Across Vaping Devices

From the metabolites identified in the plasma of mice exposed to aerosols made by Vape Pens, Mod, and JUUL devices, which were not found in Air controls, there were very limited differential targeted metabolites shared by all groups (**Figure 1F**). This indicated that metabolites were group-specific. Globally, there was a similar pattern, with no differential metabolites in all groups. There was a high correlation in the metabolic profile of mice exposed to aerosols once daily versus three times daily (r 0.93-0.99). This suggests that *total* aerosol

murine exposures has a similar effect on the metabolite profile in the blood, whether the aerosols are administered all at once or spread out over the day.

Effects of Sex

In female mice who were exposed to e-cigarette aerosols, 18 unique metabolites were identified, while males had 25 unique metabolites. Comparing males to females led to only 1 sex-independent metabolite (**Figure 1G**). This metabolite was present at low-levels in both sexes - Putative_1-Hexadecanoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine.

Discussion

These data highlight some key points that may assist in the design of future research studies, as well as the development of tobacco policies. They also give insight into the molecular impact of these popular nicotine delivery devices. We found that each type of e-cigarette exposure led to unique metabolite profiles within the circulation of exposed mice. Unique profiles can reveal specific metabolomic signatures that are associated with disease risks; these signatures have been associated with cardiovascular disease and serve as predictors of chronic kidney disease [17, 18].

Specifically, JUUL Mango and Vape Pen mice had different plasma levels of eicosanoids, biological molecules that act as activators and suppressors of inflammation [19]. Pro-inflammatory and anti-inflammatory eicosanoids have been associated with rheumatologic diseases. More recently, eicosanoid storms have been found to potentially play a role in severe COVID-19 [20]. Though extensive research is still needed, the involvement of eicosanoids in

inflammatory physiological processes is concerning as the immune system constantly balances between an inflammatory and anti-inflammatory state; any disruption of this balance in either direction is known to lead to pathology and thus disease.

Chronic inhalation of e-cigarette aerosols induced specific metabolomic signatures in the circulation depending on e-device used, nicotine content, flavorings, sex, and duration of exposure. Notably, spacing of exposures had no impact on the chemical signature produced while sex played a major role, with disparate systemic metabolite profiles in males vs females exposed to e-cigarette aerosols. Daily inhalation of JUUL aerosols led to numerous metabolite changes occurring in a flavor-specific manner when mice were challenged with inhaled LPS as a model of gram-negative pneumonia, demonstrating that use of these popular pod-based devices leads to immunomodulation. Finally, the composition of each e-cigarette device and e-liquid, as well as temperature and wattage applied to the e-liquid in the process of vaping and aerosolization, played a role in the chemical profile produced, which in turn impacted the metabolomic profile of the host.

Conclusion

Thus, these data demonstrate that e-device type, chemical components, duration of exposure, and sex all play critical roles in altering metabolomic profiles. This is concerning as unique profiles can reveal specific metabolomic signatures associated with disease risks; these signatures have been associated with cardiovascular disease and serve as predictors of chronic kidney disease [17, 18]. Future work is needed to fully understand the physiologic and pathophysiologic effects of these e-cigarette aerosol exposure related metabolomic changes within humans.

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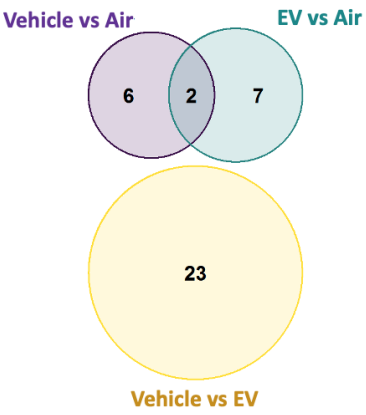
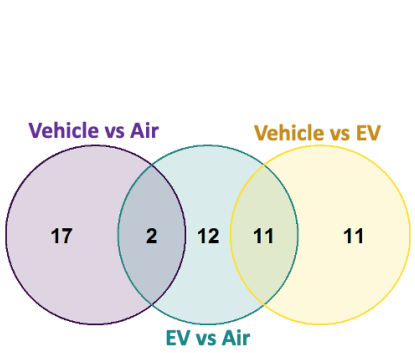
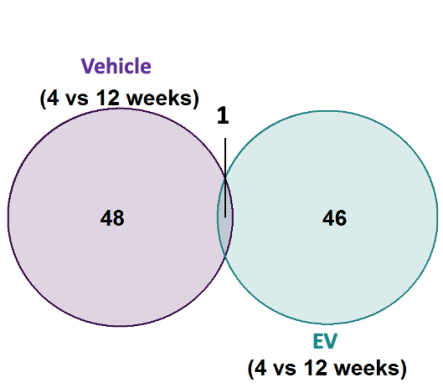
A


Mod x12 weeks
Vehicle vs Air
EV vs Air
6
2
7
23
Vehicle vs EV

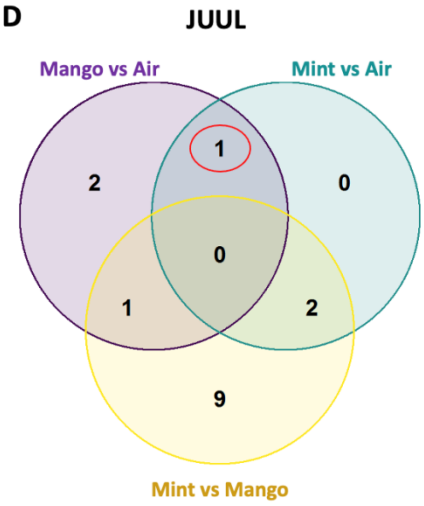
B


Mod x4 weeks
Vehicle vs Air
Vehicle vs EV
17
2
12
11
11
EV vs Air

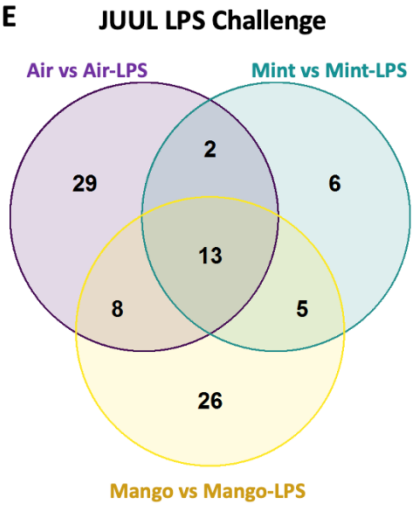
C


Mod 12 versus 4 weeks
Vehicle
(4 vs 12 weeks)
1
48
46
EV
(4 vs 12 weeks)

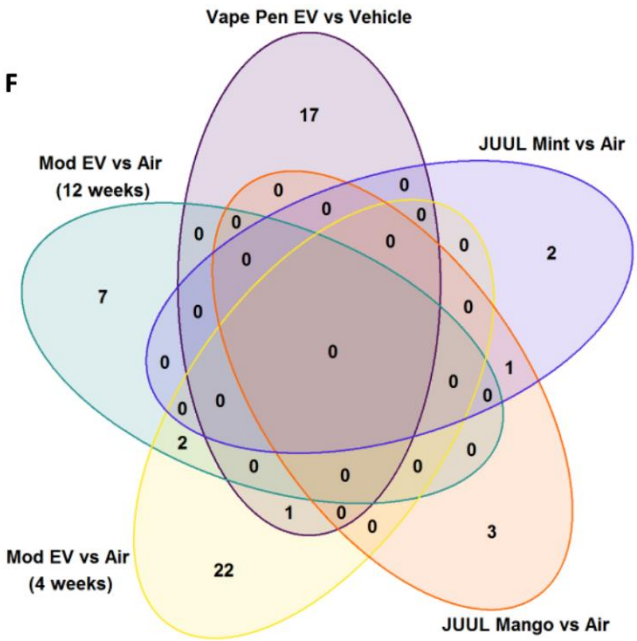
D


JUUL
Mango vs Air
Mint vs Air
1
2
0
0
1
2
9
Mint vs Mango

E


JUUL LPS Challenge
Air vs Air-LPS
Mint vs Mint-LPS
2
29
6
13
8
5
26
Mango vs Mango-LPS

F


Vape Pen EV vs Vehicle
17
Mod EV vs Air
(12 weeks)
JUUL Mint vs Air
2
7
0
1
2
0
1
0
3
22
Mod EV vs Air
(4 weeks)
JUUL Mango vs Air

G

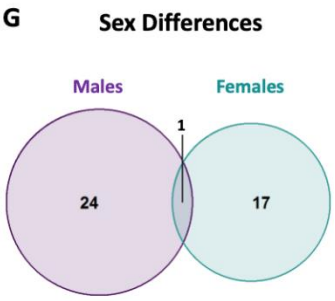

Sex Differences
Males
Females
1
24
17

Figure 1. Changes in circulating metabolites induced by daily, chronic inhalation of aerosols generated from multiple e-devices, e-liquids, for varying exposure durations. Mice were placed in the inExpose system (Scireq) for 1 hour daily. Box mod, vape pen and pod-based e-devices (JUUL) were activated and negative pressure applied to generate fresh e-cigarette aerosols every 20 seconds, with puff duration of 4 seconds across all devices. Plasma isolated on the day of harvest underwent comprehensive non-targeted, LC-MS based metabolomics to assay thousands of circulating bioactive molecules. **A.** Venny diagram of significant metabolites (P<0.05) identified in the plasma of mice whom inhaled aerosols generated from box mod e-cigarette devices. No-nicotine aerosols (Vehicle) compared to Air controls (purple), nicotine containing aerosols (EV) vs. Air controls (green), and Vehicle vs. EV (yellow) after 12 weeks of daily 1-hour exposures. **B.** Venny diagram of significant metabolites (P<0.05) identified in comparisons among Vehicle vs. Air (purple), EV vs. Air (green), and Vehicle vs. EV (yellow) after 4 weeks of daily box-Mod aerosol exposures. **C.** Venny diagram of unique and shared metabolites across different time exposures (4- vs. 12-weeks) for Vehicle (purple) vs. EV (green). **D.** Metabolites detected in JUUL Mango vs. Air (purple), JUUL Mint vs. Air (green) and JUUL Mango vs. JUUL Mint (yellow) after 4 weeks of exposure. The red circle indicates the sole metabolite shared between JUUL Mango and JUUL Mint exposures: putative beta-HC. **E.** Venny diagram of unique and shared metabolites in the setting of LPS challenge across Air (purple), JUUL Mango (yellow) and JUUL Mint (green) exposures. **F.** Identification of different metabolites across all device types and exposure durations, with no overlapping metabolites across e-cigarette exposures. Inhalation of JUUL aerosols caused the smallest metabolite signatures, relative to box mod and vape pen aerosols. The reduced metabolite signatures may be due to mod and JUUL devices applying different temperatures and wattages to e-liquids. **G.** Sex effects on metabolite changes induced by 4 weeks of e-cigarette aerosol exposure, with males (purple) and females (green) only having one shared metabolite induced by e-cigarette exposure. Plots were developed using *VennDiagram* package in R.