

E-cigarette users under fire at Wal-Mart, other companies

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Ohio's biggest employer, Wal-Mart Stores, is among a growing number of companies whose health plans have begun charging workers extra if they use electronic cigarettes, [according to Modern Healthcare](#).

Battery operated e-cigarettes are marketed as an alternative to smoking tobacco, but some companies view inhaling vapor from an e-cig as an unhealthy habit rather than a tool to stop smoking.

Wal-Mart considers e-cigarettes to be a form of tobacco use, so employees who use them are charged higher health benefit premiums, spokesman [Randy Hargrove](#) told Modern Healthcare. He declined to say how much more those who use tobacco have to pay.

Some tobacco users might have to pay up to \$2,000 a year extra to participate in company health plans, Modern Healthcare reported.

Wal-Mart employs more than 48,000 people in about 172 retail operations and four distribution centers in the state, according to Ohio's Development Services Agency. "Employers that have such policies on e-cigarettes, including Wal-Mart, generally offer exemptions from the surcharge if workers participate in smoking cessation programs, but switching to e-cigarettes is not considered by these firms as participation in such programs," according to Modern Healthcare.

Next year, United Parcel Service plans to begin charging a monthly fee of \$150 for employees who use tobacco products, including e-cigarettes that carry liquid nicotine, spokeswoman [Ivette Lopez](#) told Modern Healthcare. "FDA testing has determined that various samples (of e-cigarettes) have carcinogens and other toxic chemicals. They're just not proven to be safe."

The number of employers that added a monthly surcharge on premium contributions for workers who use tobacco increased from 35 percent in 2012 to 42 percent last year, according to an analysis by the benefits consultant firm Towers Watson and the National Business Group on Health. That analysis projected the rate to rise to 62 percent by next year. It's unclear how many companies consider e-cigarettes a tobacco product.

"E-cigarettes have not been tested for safety," [Michael Wood](#), a Tower Watson senior consultant, told Modern Healthcare. "Nobody knows what the ingredients really are, and they have not been approved as a recognized and safe method for cessation like nicotine replacement therapy patches have or nicotine gum."

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