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More teens trying flavored cigars, study finds

Over a third who smoke say they use them



Flavored cigars are legal except in Maine, New York City, and Providence, where they have been banned.

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With federal laws imposing tight regulations on cigarettes, more teens have been getting hooked on tobacco by using trendy new products that skirt the rules. Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 36 percent of middle and high school students who smoke use candy-flavored “little cigars” that look like cigarettes and can be just as addictive.

“This is probably an underreporting since many kids don’t distinguish between little cigars and cigarettes since they look virtually identical,” said CDC scientific adviser Brian King, who analyzed the results of a survey of 19,000 students in grades 6 through 12 that was published Tuesday in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#).

Many of the teen smokers said they also smoked flavored cigarettes, but all of these, except for menthol, have been banned by the US Food and Drug Administration, which was granted authority by Congress to impose strict rules on cigarette makers.

Overall, the survey found that 5 percent of high school students and 1 percent of middle schoolers used flavored little cigars, even though laws prohibit their sale to minors.

It's legal for little cigars, such as those made by Swisher Sweets, to come in grape, cherry, strawberry, and other sweet flavors, except in Maine, New York City, and Providence, which have banned the sale of flavored cigar products.

Flavorings can mask the natural harshness and taste of tobacco, making flavored tobacco products more palatable to youngsters. In fact, the CDC researchers found that nearly 60 percent of teens who smoke flavored little cigars said they had no intention of quitting, compared with 49 percent of those who smoked an unflavored product.

“When we see candy and fruit flavors in little cigars, we know that's the tobacco industry trying to hook kids,” said Erika Sward, assistant vice president of the American Lung Association. “That's why it's important for the FDA to move forward to aggressively regulate them.”

Senator Edward Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, said in a statement Tuesday that he, too, would support such regulation. “Kids are tricked into thinking that these bubblegum, fruit, and candied flavored cigars are sweet treats,” Markey said, “when in fact they serve merely as a gateway to tobacco addiction, putting them on a path to serious diseases and premature death.”

The FDA plans to issue new guidelines on electronic or e-cigarettes and cigars in the next few months.

Swisher Sweets did not respond to a request for comment.

While cigarette smoking rates have sharply declined among middle and high school students over the past decade, the percentage of teens using e-cigarettes has been on the rise. A CDC study issued in September found that nearly 7 percent of students in grades 6 through 12 said they had tried e-cigarettes in 2012, up from 3 percent in 2011.

The battery operated devices deliver nicotine through a liquid solution that's heated and inhaled as vapor; they also come in tempting flavors. Apollo Vapors, for example, offers Almond Joyee — marketed as “the candy bar taste without the calories” — and French Vanilla, which the company says is “like biting into a deliciously sweet vanilla cupcake.”

The FDA hasn't determined whether e-cigarettes pose the same level of health risk as cigarettes, but some federal health officials say parents should be warning kids to avoid them.

“E-cigarettes increase the likelihood of becoming addicted to nicotine, and teens who use them are three times as likely to also use cigarettes,” said Dr. Tim McAfee, director of the CDC's Office on Smoking and Health. “There's zero reason for kids to be using them.”

But kids can get e-cigarettes easily because unlike tobacco products, which can't legally be sold to anyone under age 18, there aren't any age restrictions on buying them.

Little cigars are even more worrisome, McAfee said, because they are thin and contain filters causing teens to inhale the tobacco smoke deeply into their lungs like cigarette smoke — rather than puffing on them like larger, unfiltered cigars.

Over the short term, using little cigars could aggravate asthma and reduce athletic ability by interfering with lung function. A long-term habit could carry the same health risks as cigarettes, such as lung cancer, breast cancer, and heart disease.

Another reason teens may be drawn to little cigars could be their reduced price. While Massachusetts requires that cigars have the same \$3.51-per-pack state tax as cigarettes, some states don't require that this tax be added to cigar products.

Instead of paying nearly \$10 for a pack of little cigars, teens in these states could be purchasing a pack for half that price.

“The new study highlights the potential for our nation to erase 50 years of success in reducing cigarette use,” Sward said, “by increasing our use of little cigars and other tobacco products.”

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2013/10/22/flavored-cigars-gaining-popularity-among-teenagers/aj5dUmasYWOofUKi9uGYe1O/story.html>