

# ARTICLE

## Teens swapping cigarettes for flavored mini cigars

By Lena H. Sun, Staff writers Timothy Wilson and Tim Smith contributed to this report.  
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They come in ice cream flavors such as strawberry, watermelon, vanilla and chocolate. They are packaged in colorful wrappers. "Little cigars" are finding a niche among teens, who like the price — about a dollar — and the taste.

Young smokers say these cigarette-size little cigars and cigarillos — slimmer versions of big cigars — look better and can be bought one at a time instead of spending more than \$5 for a pack of cigarettes. Many teens also think that they are less addictive.

That's a problem.

"You have the same cancer-causing chemicals but wrapped in flavors that don't let you experience the harsh sensation of cigar or tobacco use," said Donald Shell, interim director for Maryland's Center for Health Promotion, Education, Tobacco Use Prevention and Cessation.

Maryland is one of several states where the increase in youth cigar smoking has been large enough that it has caught up with and in some cases surpassed cigarette use in that age group, according to state and federal health data and anti-tobacco groups.

To fight back, the state will launch ads on billboards, buses and trains starting next week. The home page of the campaign Web site, [thecigartrap.com](http://thecigartrap.com), shows youngsters running to an ice cream truck with a giant cigar on its roof. "No matter how they sugarcoat it ... cigars kill," a warning reads.

Little cigars look like cigarettes but are wrapped in a brown paperlike substance that contains some tobacco leaf.

The Food and Drug Administration banned flavored cigarettes in 2009, but no such ban applies to cigars. Selling tobacco products to anyone younger than 18 is illegal, but not all stores check identification.

Some teens and young adults said the smaller cigars were appealing on several levels. Several said the most popular brand is Black & Mild, whose cigarillos come in wine and creme in addition to regular flavors.

Marcus Hunter, 18, said he started smoking cigarillos when he was 14 or 15. "I thought it would help me with stress, you know, from school and stuff," said Hunter during a brief interview outside the Gallery Place Metro station in the District. Hunter, who attended Potomac High School in Oxon Hill, said he stopped smoking a year ago.

Nick Beirne, 20, said he started smoking cigarillos when he turned 18. "It's a social thing," said Beirne, who said he smokes them once or twice a week. A graduate of Yorktown

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High School in Arlington County, he said teens smoke them “because they think they’re less addictive, it looks better and it’s cheaper” than cigarettes.

A 21-year-old who spoke on the condition of anonymity said that when he was at Calvert High School in Prince Frederick, he and many of his friends thought “the whole cigar thing was way more big to smoke pot,” explaining how brands like Swisher Sweets and Black & Mild would be hollowed out and filled with marijuana.

Between 2000 and 2010, cigarette smoking decreased by nearly 40 percent among Maryland high school students, but cigar use jumped more than 11 percent, according to the Maryland Youth Tobacco Survey, a survey of high school students conducted every two years.

In 2000, 23 percent of Maryland high school students younger than 18 reported smoking cigarettes in the previous 30 days, compared with 12.5 percent for cigars, the data show. By 2010, the percentage smoking cigarettes fell to 14.1 percent, and the percentage smoking cigars rose to 13.9 percent. In other words, officials said, almost as many youth smoke cigars as smoke cigarettes.

Nationally, cigar smoking is the second-most-common form of tobacco use among youth, after cigarettes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 14 percent of high school students smoke cigars (18.6 percent among boys; 8.8 percent among girls), according to 2009 CDC data.

But in some states, cigar smoking among some youth groups is more popular than cigarette smoking. In Massachusetts, 18 percent of high school boys smoke cigarettes, but 22 percent smoke cigars, according to 2009 CDC data. A study in Ohio found cigars to be the most popular tobacco product among high school students. In New Jersey, researchers found cigarette use dropped by 29 percent between 2001 and 2004, but for the first time ever, more high school boys reported smoking cigars (17.2 percent) than cigarettes (15.9 percent).

Experts say most states have considerably lower taxes on cigars than on cigarettes. The rise in youth cigar use in New Jersey occurred during a period when the state increased cigarette excise tax three times while the tax on other tobacco products was cut in 2002 from 48 percent to 30 percent, according to researchers at the School of Public Health at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

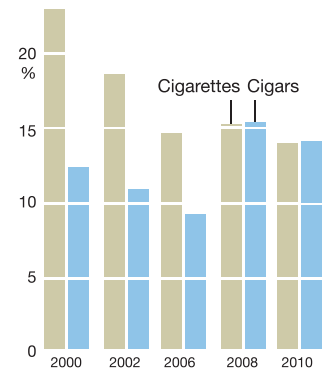
The larger issue, according to Matthew Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, “is real concern that tobacco manufacturers are using little cigars to undermine the impact of the federal ban on flavored cigarettes.”

The Cigar Association of America, which represents major cigar manufacturers, said in a statement that its members sell a legal product for adults, advocate against youth usage and have used flavors for more than 100 years. The state health campaign, it said, “unfairly maligns an industry that provides jobs and generates tax revenue in Maryland.”

### Teens and cigars

Surveys of Maryland high school students found cigar smoking to be nearly as prevalent as cigarette smoking.

Percentage of high school students younger than 18 who smoked cigarettes and cigars in the previous 30 days.



Source: Maryland Youth Tobacco Survey