

ARTICLE Teenagers trading in cigarettes for flavored cigars

Maryland starts campaign to curb cigar smoking among kids
By Andrea K. Walker, *The Baltimore Sun*, November 17, 2011

Baltimore, MD — The number of Maryland teenagers who smoke cigarettes dropped significantly in the past decade, but state health officials say new statistics show that more young people are now getting hooked on candy-flavored cigars instead.

In response, the state announced Thursday that it is launching a marketing campaign aimed at curbing the problem and trying to prevent the unraveling of years of work to stop teens from smoking.

“It jeopardizes all of the gains in Maryland we have made in terms of tobacco use, and we cannot let that happen,” said Dr. Donald Shell, interim director of the state Center for Health Promotion & Education.

Cigarette smoking among middle and high school students dropped 38.9 percent from 2000 to 2010, according to results of a survey by the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Cigar use increased by more than 11 percent during the same time period.

A decade ago, 12.5 percent of Marylanders under age 18 said they had smoked a cigar in the last 30 days, while 23 percent had smoked a cigarette. That gap narrowed significantly last year when 13.9 percent of young people had smoked a cigar in the last 30 days and 14.1 percent had smoked a cigarette.

Selling tobacco products to minors is illegal, but not all stores check identification, and many teenagers find adults to buy them cigarettes and cigars.

Health advocates have long argued that tobacco companies lure teens into buying the cigars with colorful packaging and flavors like strawberry, peach, mango or chocolate that cover up the taste of the tobacco. The cigars are also sold individually, sometimes for less than a dollar, an amount that many children and teens can afford.

Many teenagers don't believe cigars have the same health risks as cigarettes. But state health officials said that cigars have more tobacco than cigarettes, burn longer and give off greater amounts of secondhand smoke. They put people at risk for ailments such as cancer, emphysema and infertility, just as cigarettes do.

In addition, officials say, the cigars are sometimes hollowed out and filled with marijuana.

Several attempts at the state and local level to ban the sale of the flavored cigars or to require that they be sold in larger packets to drive up the cost, have failed. Baltimore is fighting in court to end the individual sale of the cigars.

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The Food and Drug Administration banned the sale of flavored cigarettes nationally in 2009, but not cigars. Pending legislation could soon give the agency more regulatory authority over cigars, although that doesn't necessarily mean an immediate ban.

A representative with the Cigar Association of America did not return calls Thursday, but the group has spoken out against cigar bans in the past.

State Secretary of Health Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein said the new marketing campaign is a good first step to help reduce cigar smoking by teens until broader change is made.

"What this adds up to is a real threat," Sharfstein said. "It's not just about cigarettes and cigars. It's about health."

The \$125,000 campaign funded by federal stimulus money will start in mid-December. It features a picture of children chasing after an ice cream truck with a giant cigar on the roof.

The message on the advertisement reads: "Warning: Cigars are sold in the same flavors & prices as ice cream. No matter how they sugarcoat it, cigars kill."

The marketing campaign was unveiled at Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical High School in Baltimore, where students said cigars are easy for young people to get.

Taneisha Carter, a 17-year-old senior who lives in Cherry Hill, said that she thinks the tobacco companies shouldn't use such colorful packaging. She also doesn't like how prominently they are displayed in stores.

"You go in to get a chicken box or buy candy, and they are right there, tempting kids," Carter said.

Carter said she tried a cigarette once when she was 12 years old and didn't like the taste.

Health advocates applauded the campaign even as they said more can be done.

Kathleen Dachille, an associate professor and director of the Legal Resource Center for Tobacco, Regulation, Litigation and Advocacy at the University of Maryland School of Law, said hitting people in their pocketbook would help cut back on cigar use. She supports a tax on cigars and banning single sales.

"The campaign is fantastic, but of course more can be done," she said.