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Kids are Tobacco Targets

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The flavors are tempting: strawberry, chocolate and vanilla. More exotic ones such as warm winter toffee, margarita mixer or "twista lime" are also available. Parents can find these or similar flavors of jellied candy eggs to put in their children's Easter baskets in a few weeks.

But the flavors might also be found in items in an older child's pocket or hidden under a bed. They are the flavors of today's novel tobacco products: Kauai Kolada Camel cigarettes, strawberry Liquid Zoo cigarettes, Black & Mild apple-flavored pipe tobacco cigars or peach-flavored Swisher Sweets small cigars, to name just a few. If cigarettes or cigars are not the tobacco product of choice, there is Kayak's smokeless grape-flavored chewing tobacco or Camel's spice or frost SNUS, which are a smokeless, spit-less tobacco product. And legislation in the Senate seeks to have the U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulate tobacco products.

"The grape cigarettes. A lot of my friends are smoking those," said South Side High School sophomore Jose Bordallo, who is a member of United Hispanic-Americans' Students Working Against Tobacco. Bordallo said a friend, an athlete in school, recently asked to borrow a dollar. The next day, Bordallo's friend told him he used the dollar to buy flavored, smokeless tobacco.

A report released Feb. 20 titled "Big Tobacco's Guinea Pigs: How an Unregulated Industry Experiments on America's Kids and Consumers," blasts the tobacco industry's use of flavorings, youth-appealing packaging and market strategies that include large ads in magazines such as Rolling Stone and Sports Illustrated, which have high youth leadership. The groups issuing the report -- the American Cancer Society, American Lung Association, American Heart Association and Campaign For Tobacco-Free Kids -- are pushing legislation that would give the FDA regulatory authority over tobacco products. The FDA already regulates smoking-cessation products containing nicotine; but cigarettes, cigars, chewing tobacco or any other tobacco product falls under no regulatory agency.

"Even our dog food is subject to FDA regulation," said Danny McGoldrick, vice president for research at the Washington, D.C.-based Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. The tobacco companies can make changes to their products, add to them, make them more appealing and not only can we not do anything about it, we don't know about it before it's happened."

Bardallo's South Side classmate Jessica Rosales, also a nonsmoker and a member of the United Hispanic-Americans' student group, said a lot of kids begin smoking in middle school. Like Bardallo, she agrees flavored products or those with eye-catching packaging are wooing young people. The sleek hot pink-and-black packaging of Camel No. 9s, introduced last year, is especially appealing to teenage girls, she said. The 2004 Brown & Williamson Kool Mixx campaign featured young rappers, disc jockeys and dancers on cigarette packs and advertisements.

Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., is a co-sponsor of Senate Bill 625 that would give the FDA regulatory authority over tobacco products.

"With new marketing campaigns targeting younger audiences each year, consumers must be aware of the potential health consequences of the tobacco products they purchase and use, as well as uncertain claims that one product may be less detrimental to one's health than another," Lugar said in a news release issued with the report. The bill has bipartisan support, with 56 Senate co-sponsors and 215 House co-sponsors. Sen. Evan Bayh, D-Ind., has also signed on in support.

Data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention do not tell a story of increased tobacco use by U.S. youths. However, 2005 is the most recent year for which data are available. Smoking rates among high school teens dropped significantly between 1997 and 2005, but the rates remained unchanged from 2003 to 2005, with more than one in five teens reporting smoking cigarettes.

However, between 1997 and 2005, the levels of nicotine in cigarettes have risen, according to a 2007 Harvard School of Public Health report. Average nicotine levels increased nearly 12 percent.

Proponents of the legislation say decisions regarding lowering levels of nicotine or removing certain chemicals must be science-based.

"We need to understand the role of the product itself," McGoldrick said. "We don't know if reducing nicotine right off the bat is the best thing to do." It could cause cravings that would actually increase tobacco usage, he said.

Nicotine-replacement therapies, even gum such as Nicorette, have passed multiple levels of testing before receiving FDA approval for sale to the public.

"The government already regulates nicotine, but we have a special protected industry with tobacco."

More and more states and individual communities are passing ordinances banning smoking in all public places. As that has occurred, McGoldrick said tobacco companies that once made only smoking products have moved into the smokeless tobacco market.

"Some have pushed the idea that smokeless tobacco should replace cigarettes," he said, noting new smokeless products that don't require spitting are being marketed as options to use where smoking is not allowed.

Philip Morris, according to the Jan. 18 Wall Street Journal, has also developed a new product, available only overseas right now, called Marlboro Intense, which has a high-tar, high-nicotine content that allows smokers to get a quick nicotine jolt when the user has only a short time available where smoking is allowed.

Bardallo and Rosales said another issue affecting sales of tobacco to youths is that more outlets such as gas stations, particularly in lower-income parts of town, are selling more affordable single products rather than just packs.

Legislation giving FDA regulatory control of tobacco has failed in the past, but McGoldrick said, "We think we have the votes." The bill has passed out of committee in the Senate and the House version is now with a subcommittee. If it is passed, however, a presidential veto is not out of the question. "This administration has not been supportive on tobacco control," he said, noting President Bush has twice vetoed tobacco tax bills.

Funding for the FDA would come from "pennies per pack, less than a nickel a pack," McGoldrick said, noting 18 billion packs of cigarettes are sold annually.

The FDA has come under criticism for not adequately overseeing the safety of pharmaceuticals. Giving the agency another realm of products to test and regulate could prove overwhelming.

McGoldrick counters that just because the FDA has "had this problem," does not excuse the agency of responsibility, if adequate resources are provided. After all, he said, the FDA's mission is "to protect the health of Americans."