

OREGON PUBLIC HEALTH DIVISION • OREGON HEALTH AUTHORITY

FLAVORED TOBACCO: SWEET, CHEAP, AND WITHIN KIDS' REACH

Taste it and you will get a desire for it.  
--Irish Proverb, Dorien Kelly,  
*The Last Bride in Ballymuir*

HOW SWEET IT IS

Watermelon. Strawberry. Cherry. Vanilla. Chocolate. Marshmallow. Menthol. Quick, which of these flavors are found in kids' cereals? And which are found in tobacco products? True, we have yet to encounter menthol cereal, but otherwise, the answer is 'all of the above' to all of the above. And the list of kid-friendly tobacco flavors keeps growing. They say that Trix™ are for kids. If so, who are these tobacco products for?

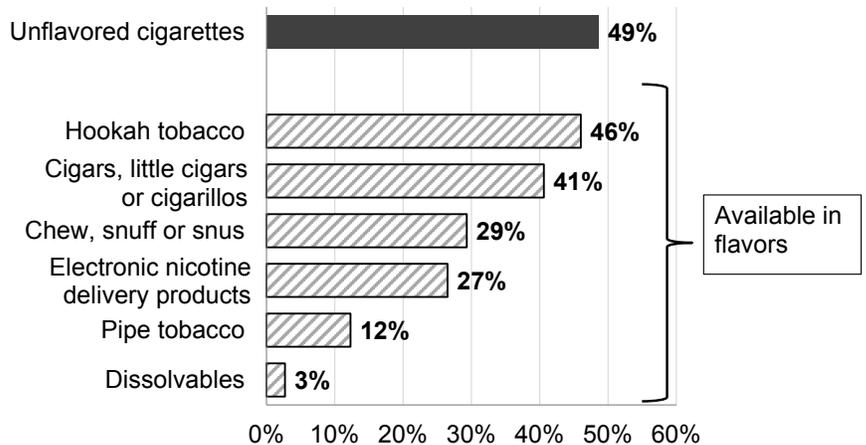
PLENTY OF FLAVORS TO SAVOR

You may know that flavored cigarettes were banned by the FDA in 2009. Banned, that is, unless your name was menthol. Menthol is still going strong, and its contribution to cigarette smoking among kids is easy to see. In Oregon, 48% of 11th grade cigarette smokers report smoking menthol cigarettes.\* Long-term data indicate that menthol cigarettes: (1) increase initiation of cigarette smoking and progression to regular use; (2) increase nicotine dependence; and (3) reduce success in smoking cessation.<sup>1</sup>

But menthol cigarettes are just the tip of the iceberg. While approximately 9% of all 11th graders in Oregon smoke cigarettes, about 18% of 11th graders use other tobacco products.\* These include e-cigarettes, cigars (large and small), hookah, snuff, dip, chew, and dissolvable tobacco products, among others. While the shapes, sizes, packaging, and modes of ingestion vary for these tobacco products, what they all have in common is their availability in an unlimited variety of flavors. At latest count, >7,000 unique flavors, in fact.<sup>2</sup>

The appeal to kids is clear. Among 11th graders in Oregon who use tobacco, the use of products that are

Figure 1. Tobacco product use among 11th grade tobacco users, Oregon, 2013.\*



available in flavors rivals that of unflavored cigarettes (Figure 1). As Figure 1 shows, product use is not mutually exclusive, with many young tobacco users using two or more products at the same time, or switching between products. This demonstrates the potential for introduction to one product and progression to the use of others over time. The impact of flavors on young tobacco users is further reflected in the fact that 28% of tobacco smokers aged 18–24 years report smoking tobacco products with flavors other than menthol. That's about three times the rate for those over age 25.<sup>†</sup>

According to Portland State University researchers, flavor additives that are being used to sweeten tobacco products are the same as those used in LifeSavers™ and Kool-Aid™.<sup>3</sup> These types of fruit, candy, and dessert flavors appeal to kids and young people,<sup>4</sup> who report they choose tobacco products with flavors over unflavored tobacco because they 'taste better'.<sup>5</sup> So while youth cigarette smoking continues to decline, use of other tobacco products has remained stable or, in some cases, increased substantially.\* Flavors are the common denominator for the products that have maintained their youth appeal.

LIKE SELLING CANDY TO A BABY

In addition to flavors, we know that marketing and price are key elements that influence youth tobacco use. Youth perceptions about the safety and addictiveness of flavored products may also play a role.

Marketing. Advertising and promotional efforts by tobacco companies are known to cause the initiation and progression of tobacco use among young people.<sup>6</sup> Flavored tobacco products are visibly marketed on television, in stores, and elsewhere. Their presence on television is made possible by e-cigarettes, which are not subject to regulations that keep other tobacco products off the air. Television ads for e-cigarettes are routinely seen on youth-centric networks, including ABC Family and MTV.<sup>7</sup>

Flavored tobacco products are also marketed in stores. Bright packaging **Image 1. Flavored tobacco displayed next to candy at cash register.**



\* Oregon Healthy Teens, 2013

† Oregon Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2013



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**Image 2. Tobacco products and packaging look like candy.**



and product placement at the register, near candy, and often at childrens' eye-level, make them very vis-

ible to kids (Image 1, *verso*; Image 2). With 70% of teens shopping at a convenience store at least once a week, exposure to in-store advertising is routine.<sup>6</sup> Several studies show that exposure to in-store tobacco marketing of various types increases the likelihood that youth will initiate smoking and progress from experimentation to regular smoking; kids with the most exposure are the most likely to start and continue smoking. In 2013, seven out of ten Oregon 11th grade students and six out of ten 8th grade students reported seeing an advertisement for tobacco products on a storefront or inside a store.<sup>‡</sup>

**Price.** When tobacco prices go up, youth tobacco use goes down. Flavored tobacco products are well within the budget of a cash-strapped teen. Many federal and state tax codes that apply to cigarettes don't apply to flavored non-cigarette tobacco. These gaps allow for packaging and labeling practices that keep prices lower for consumers. For example, cigarettes must be sold in packages of at least twenty; however, little cigars, like candy bars, can be purchased one or two at a time, for less than a dollar or two a piece. Indus-

‡ *CD Summary*, April 22, 2014, Vol. 63, No. 8.

try promotions for flavored tobacco products such as, "buy two packs, get one free," product giveaways, and free samples also lower the price.

**Risk perceptions.** Youth tobacco users mistakenly assume that flavored tobacco products are safer and less addictive than cigarettes.<sup>5,8</sup> These risk perceptions likely contribute to the use of flavored tobacco products we see among young people. That creates the potential for initiating a life-long addiction to nicotine through the use of flavored e-cigarettes, little cigars and smokeless products.

#### WHAT CAN WE DO?

If parents or patients ask about flavored tobacco, they need to know that flavored tobacco is not safer than non-flavored tobacco products. Young people are the most likely to use flavored tobacco products. Teenagers' brains are still developing and vulnerable to nicotine, which is highly addictive and present in all tobacco products.<sup>6</sup> Nearly 90% of people who smoke start before they are 18 years old,<sup>6</sup> so this is the time when anything that tips the balance toward experimenting with tobacco products has the greatest impact.

Federal law does not prevent state and local governments from regulating the sale of flavored tobacco products. Some state and local governments have passed laws that prohibit the sale of various flavored tobacco products. In New York City and Providence, Rhode Island flavored tobacco products can only be sold in adult-only facilities; the State of Maine prohibits the sale of flavored cigars; and Chicago banned sales of menthol cigarettes within 500 feet of schools.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Oregon Public Health Division's Tobacco Prevention and Education Program's web site: <http://public.health.oregon.gov/PreventionWellness/TobaccoPrevention/Pages/index.aspx>
- Smokefree Oregon web site: <http://smokefreeoregon.com/>

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