



Fruit-flavored tobacco more available than fresh produce in Southern California stores



An increasing number of Southern California stores sell e-cigarettes, and shoppers are more likely to find fruit-flavored tobacco products than fresh produce on the shelves. FILE PHOTO

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An increasing number of Southern California stores sell e-cigarettes, and shoppers are more likely to find fruit-flavored tobacco products than fresh produce on the shelves.

That's according to 2016 data released Wednesday by the statewide "Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community" campaign that analyzed advertising and merchandise from more than 7,100 stores across California. The survey included pharmacies, supermarkets, convenience stores and smoke shops.

Since the last survey in 2013, the number of Los Angeles County stores selling e-cigarettes jumped 34 percent. The increase was 21 percent for Orange County, 15 percent for San Bernardino County and 9 percent for Riverside County.

"A lot of these stores are located in close proximity to schools," said Ravi Choudhuri, advocacy manager for the American Lung Association's Orange County division. "We know from all different types of research that it's a gateway to tobacco use. The way it's marketed everywhere is to get lifetime users, especially among younger customers."

The findings show that tobacco products are easier to find than nutritious foods.

In Los Angeles County, 36 percent of stores sold fresh produce, with 78 percent selling flavored tobacco products such as cherry, grape or strawberry. In Riverside County, 39 percent sold fresh produce and 80 percent sold flavored tobacco. For San Bernardino County, 47 percent sold fresh produce and 86 percent sold flavored tobacco.

And in Orange County, 57.5 percent of stores sold fresh fruit or vegetables, while 85 percent stocked flavored tobacco products.

The survey also tallied storefront advertising of healthy food, such as milk, fruit or vegetables. Such signs were displayed at 11 percent of Riverside County stores, 13 percent in Orange County, 14 percent in Los Angeles County and 21 percent in San Bernardino County.

Georgiana Bostean, who teaches sociology and environmental science at Chapman University, said environmental factors, including proximity, play a large role in shaping health choices.

"If you have dessert in front of you, you're much more likely to eat that," she said. "But if you don't bring M&Ms to work with your lunch each day, you're much less likely to seek out those M&Ms."

Bostean said store advertising can also make tobacco products seem attractive and socially acceptable.

"Especially for adolescents, seeing more of these retailers may ignite curiosity about that particular behavior or product and make them more likely to access it," Bostean said.

Evi Hernandez, project director of the San Bernardino County Tobacco Control Program, said another concern is that not all stores are following the state law that raised the legal age to buy tobacco products from 18 to 21 last year.

"Unfortunately, there's a lot of stores that would rather take any financial benefit over the well-being of our young kids," Hernandez said.

Choudhuri said he's hopeful that last year's passage of Prop. 56, which raised the cigarette tax by \$2 a pack and will begin taxing e-cigarette products in April, will help drive down consumer demand.

"Research shows over and over that increased product pricing reduces the amount of people that use the product, especially kids, because they don't have as much money," he said.

To view more survey results, visit <http://healthystoreshealthycommunity.com>.

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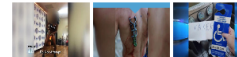
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