

## Are SLO County youth overwhelmed with unhealthy choices?

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San Luis Obispo County health officials are citing a statewide survey on marketing and the availability of tobacco, alcohol, condoms and certain foods as evidence county residents, and particularly youth, are overwhelmed with unhealthy choices at local stores they visit.

The survey was conducted in the summer of 2016 as part of a statewide campaign promoting reduced availability of tobacco products, increased availability of fresh fruits and vegetables and increased availability of condoms on unlocked shelves. The "Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community" survey

contains information collected from more than 7,100 stores statewide, including pharmacies, supermarkets, delis and convenience and liquor stores, as well as tobacco-only stores.

Data gatherers found the availability of e-cigarettes in San Luis Obispo County stores increased by 29 percent between 2013 and 2016. County health officials say there has been a subsequent spike in e-cigarette use by teens and young adults.

Cigarette smoking in SLO County is slightly below the state average. In SLO County, 12.5 percent of adults smoke cigarettes, compared to 12.7 percent statewide.

In addition to selling traditional cigarettes and e-cigarettes, 92 percent of SLO County stores sell "little cigars" or cigarillos. Furthermore, 64 percent of stores sell a popular brand of little cigars in individual packs for less than a dollar.

Youth drinking appears to be more prevalent in SLO County than statewide.

A survey of local 11th graders found 38 percent of participants used alcohol before the age of 15. Statewide, 29 percent of 11th graders used alcohol before the age of 15.

In SLO County, 28 percent of 11th graders binge drink, whereas 18 percent do statewide.

The sexually transmitted disease gonorrhea is less of a problem in SLO County than across California. In SLO County, there are 61.2 cases of gonorrhea per 100,000 people. Statewide, there are 138.9 cases of gonorrhea per 100,000 people.

In SLO County, 80.6 percent of stores surveyed sell condoms, and 61.1 percent of stores place condoms on unlocked shelves.

Only 60 percent of SLO County stores sell fresh fruits and vegetables, according to the survey.

As for marketing, only 14 percent of stores advertised healthy products on their storefronts. But, 67 percent of storefronts advertised unhealthy products, according to the survey.

"This survey found that our community's youth are inundated with unhealthy messages and choices," County Health Officer Dr. Penny Borenstein said. "We need to change what information and options our kids are exposed to and work to surround them with healthy choices and messaging instead."

