

Local News

Public Health Survey Shows Increasing Availability of Tobacco Products in Santa Barbara County

By Brooke Holland, Noozhawk Staff Writer | @NoozhawkNews | March 8, 2017 | 7:17 p.m.



Santa Barbara County health officials say new research shows an alarming 68-percent spike in the availability of electronic cigarettes to youth since 2013.

This finding is a slice of information released by the [Santa Barbara County Public Health Department](#) Wednesday and comes from a study on tobacco, alcohol, nutrition and condom availability in California stores.

The study was conducted as part of the [Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community](#) campaign, run by the California Tobacco Control Program.

In Santa Barbara County, 46 percent of retail outlets were visited for the survey.

Researchers gathered statewide information in the summer of 2016 from more than 7,000 stores in all 58 California counties including pharmacies, supermarkets, delis, convenience and liquor stores and also in tobacco-only stores.

The data examines the availability and marketing practices of unhealthy and healthy products.

"The goal of the study is to educate our communities and become aware," said Charity Dean, public health officer for Santa Barbara County. "Looking at the data helps everyone make healthier choices."

Health officials held an event Wednesday to release the study results and Dean said e-cigarette, tobacco and alcohol industry marketing tactics are directed at youth.

"I'm concerned — as a health officer, parent and member of the community," Dean said. "We need to get the message out that our youth are being targeted."

Dean said research shows that teens using e-cigarette products are two to eight times more likely to smoke traditional cigarettes, and surveys of local youth say 14 percent of teens in high school, on average, have used electronic smoking devices.

Tobacco

Dean said kids are three times more likely to be influenced by tobacco advertisements than adults.

"Research has shown that tobacco advertising is more influential on kids than peer pressure or family smokers," she said.

Data showed the majority of stores — 81 percent — sell youth-targeted tobacco products priced as low as two for 99 cents, in flavors such as grape and strawberry.

"Sweet flavors are clearly meant to appeal to youth," Dean said.

Tobacco products are cheaper than the average candy bar or water, Dean said.

"Looking at the location of tobacco products, the flavor and increased vulnerability of children is a worrisome trend," Dean said.

According to the county, there has been a 37 percent increase in the last three years in the availability of tobacco products in Santa Barbara County, to 75 percent in 2016 from 56 percent in 2013.

Alcohol

In the county, more than 45 percent of stores advertise alcohol near candy or toys and at a youth's eye level, which exceeds both regional and state rates.

Alcohol ads in 45 percent of stores in Santa Barbara County are placed lower than 3 feet, Dean said.

"This is not an accident," Dean said. "This is marketing to children in kid-friendly areas and near kid-friendly items like candy and toys."

Alcoholic beverages that imitate soda and appeal to underage drinkers — also known as *alcopops* — are available in 82 percent of stores surveyed.

Nutrition

Public Health officials said more than half of adults in Santa Barbara County are overweight or obese, and 9 percent of local adults have been diagnosed with diabetes.

The lack of access to fruits and vegetables continues to be an issue, with 40 percent of stores carrying any fresh fruits or vegetables, a decrease of 14 percent over the past three years, according to the study.

The access and placement of sugary drinks at store checkouts continue to remain high at 60 percent, which is much higher than the state average, according to the survey.

Condom Availability

The study also evaluated Santa Barbara County stores' availability of condoms and unveiled that 60.8 percent of stores allow customers access to condoms without talking to a clerk.

Dean said studies have shown that when condoms are sold in a locked area, meaning someone has to approach a store clerk and ask the worker to unlock the condom shelf, customers are discouraged from purchasing.

"Having condoms readily available where someone can buy it off the shelf promotes condom sales," Dean said. "The point of the data is putting the healthy products in a place where a consumer can make an easy choice."

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Dean noted that condoms are an essential part of sexually transmitted disease reduction.

Safe sex practices are a growing worry for public health officials given the high rates of gonorrhea, chlamydia and syphilis in the county.

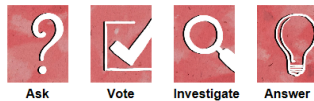
The survey found the following in Santa Barbara County:

- » More than 52 percent of stores in Santa Barbara County have tobacco marketing in “kid-friendly” locations.
- » Adults who smoke cigarettes in Santa Barbara County is 9.8 percent, compared to 12.7 percent in California.
- » Santa Barbara County adults who can't always find fresh fruits and vegetables in their neighborhood is 20.3 percent, compared to 23.4 percent in California.
- » Thirty percent of Santa Barbara County youth (11th grade) report drinking alcohol before the age of 15, compared to 29 percent in California.
- » Youth who report using any tobacco in Santa Barbara County is 14.8 percent and 13.8 percent in California.
- » Stores in low-income areas that sell tobacco products is 32.2 percent in Santa Barbara County and 31.2 percent in California.
- » Twenty-two percent of stores in Santa Barbara County sell tobacco products near schools, compared to 30.6 percent in California.
- » Gonorrhea cases per 100,000 people in Santa Barbara County is 75.4 people and 138.9 in California.
- » Sixteen percent of Santa Barbara County youth (11th grade) report binge drinking, compared to 18 percent in California.
- » Roughly 41 percent of pharmacies surveyed in Santa Barbara County sell tobacco products, which is higher than the rates of nearby regions and California.
- » Since the last survey in 2013, there was a 39 percent increase in healthy storefront ads and a significant drop in alcohol advertisements.

“The results of this survey provide valuable information,” said Rigoberto Vargas, director of the **Ventura County Public Health Department**. “We need to work harder and closer with our health advocates and retail stores to make good on our responsibility to safeguard the health of our youngest and most vulnerable population, which is our children.”

Local health officials hope to partner with stores in creating a healthier retail environment as displayed by a new project in the Santa Ynez Valley called the **Healthy Stores Healthy Valley**, a campaign that advocates health by rewarding markets for offering healthier options.

— *Noozhawk staff writer Brooke Holland can be reached at bholland@noozhawk.com. Follow Noozhawk on Twitter: [@noozhawk](#), [@NoozhawkNews](#) and [@NoozhawkBiz](#). Connect with Noozhawk on Facebook.*



Nozhawk Asks: What's Your Question?

Welcome to **Nozhawk Asks**, a new feature in which you ask the questions, you help decide what Nozhawk investigates, and you work with us to find the answers.

Here's how it works: You share your questions with us in the nearby box. In some cases, we may work with you to find the answers. In others, we may ask you to vote on your top choices to help us narrow the scope. And we'll be regularly asking you for your feedback on a specific issue or topic.

We also expect to work together with the reader who asked the winning questions to find the answer together. Nozhawk's objective is to come at questions from a place of curiosity and openness, and we believe a transparent collaboration is the key to achieve it.

The results of our investigation will be published here in this Nozhawk Asks section. Once or twice a month, we plan to do a review of what was asked and answered.

Thanks for asking!

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