

Condoms should be easier to buy in Ventura County, officials say

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Nearly three of four supermarkets, convenience shops and other community stores in Ventura County sell condoms. Only 41 percent of the businesses offer the birth control in unlocked displays, according to a new survey.

That's a problem, said Ventura County Public Health Director Rigoberto Vargas, citing the importance of condoms in reducing sexually transmitted disease.

"If they're locked, it creates an additional barrier," he said Wednesday. "We encourage retailers to re-examine their availability."

Condoms were included for the first time in a Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community survey that also assessed how more than 7,100 community stores across California displayed and sold tobacco products, alcohol, sugary drinks and fresh vegetables.

In Ventura County, more than 300 stores were surveyed last summer, ranging from convenience stores and tobacco stores to grocery stores and delicatessens. The survey is part of a statewide collaboration between public health departments across the state and other health entities.

And while some of the measures in Ventura County improved over the last survey, in 2013, the sale of e-cigarettes and other electronic smoking products rose dramatically. Three years earlier, 51 percent of the stores sold electronic smoking devices, compared to 69 percent in 2016.

That leap "reflects the spike in use by teens and young adults in the last three years," Vargas said. He suggested the balance of healthy and unhealthy choices in stores is out of whack and emphasized the importance of public health officials working with local businesses.

The Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community survey was released during a Wednesday morning news conference conducted by public health leaders from Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties. Similar news conferences were held across the state.

Like Vargas, Santa Barbara County Health Officer Charity Dean urged retailers to make condoms more available, suggesting locked counters chase away people who need protection.

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"Making it the easy choice is really critical especially for our youth," she said.

About 37 percent of the surveyed stores in Ventura County sold fresh fruits and vegetables. About 82 percent of the stores sold flavored non-cigarette tobacco products in a number that dropped from 84 percent in 2013.

Of the stores located near schools, nearly 83 percent of them sold flavored non-cigarette tobacco products.

"There is no question that kids are being inundated with unhealthy choices," Vargas said.

But there is an ongoing push for healthy foods in grocery stores, and the stores are responding to the call, said Dave Heylen, spokesman for the California Grocers Association.

"Retailers will respond to what consumers demand," he said.

An operator of a Camarillo-area convenience store who declined to give his name rebutted the allegation that stores focus on minors in the way they sell e-cigarettes, alcohol and unhealthy foods. He said the criticism is also aimed at the wrong target.

"They should target the manufacturers," he said.

The survey showed 54 percent of the county stores are selling low- or non-fat milk compared to 48 percent in 2013. About 63 percent are selling sugary drinks at the checkout counter, an improvement over the previous survey, but far above the statewide mark of 41 percent.

The survey also targeted pricing. Dean noted cigarillos may be sold for less than \$1.

"That's less than a bottle of water," she said, contending that the prices make purchases more affordable for minors, although the state's smoking age rose to 21 last year.

"One of the challenges with youth," she said of evading the minimum age, "is that when there is a will, there is a way."

Advertising was another focus. The survey showed about 32 percent of the Ventura County stores displayed alcohol ads near candy or at heights easily seen by children.

Vargas noted that 10 percent of the Ventura County stores advertised healthy products on their storefronts but 60 percent advertised tobacco products, alcohol or food deemed unhealthy.

"I would love to have it reversed," he said.

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