

Editorial: Stop flavored cigar smoking by teens

By [Star-Ledger Editorial Board](#) on September 15, 2012 at 6:04 AM

It's no longer just for the hairy man in the Hawaiian shirt. Cigar smoking is on the rise, according to a recent government report — particularly among teens.

Chocolate mint, vanilla, watermelon, mango, cherry; they sound like flavors of ice cream or candy. Now picture your kid with a small cigar hanging out the side of his mouth, and you'd be just as right.

This is how Big Tobacco peddles itself to children nowadays. Cigarette use is on the decline, thanks to high prices, regulations and anti-smoking campaigns. But the companies spotted a loophole and leapt right through it: If not cigarettes, why not small, flavored cigars?

Cigar use more than tripled from 2000 to 2011, and is more common among teens than older people, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said last month. Small cigars look almost identical to cigarettes, except they're brown. Their slight size difference puts them into a different tax category, allowing them to sell for as little as 7 cents each, or about \$1.40 a pack.

And unlike cigarettes, they can still be legally sold in fruity flavors. Even tobacco execs concede their sweetened products are for younger, beginning smokers who "want to be reminded of bubble gum," according to internal documents now in the hands of the Food and Drug Administration.

The sweetness doesn't make them any less deadly, of course. Cigars have the same toxic chemicals as cigarettes.

But one in five high school boys in New Jersey is already puffing cigars, according to the government's latest survey. Increasingly, girls do, too. In fact, cigar use is higher among middle and high school students than it is among New Jersey adults — especially when it comes to girls. Middle and high school girls have a cigar-smoking rate 5 and 10 times higher, respectively, than adult women.



Cigarettes use may be on the decline, but the use of flavored cigars is on the rise among teens. Daniel Acker/Bloomberg photo.

Which is why Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) recently reiterated his call for a federal ban on flavored cigars. This fall, our state Senate expects to vote on a bill introduced by Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex) that would raise taxes on small cigars and smokeless tobacco up to cigarette levels — nearly \$3 a package.

Both are smart solutions that could help discourage kids from taking up the habit. Vitale's tax is expected to raise about \$19 million, money that can fund anti-smoking programs and advertising.

More than 4,000 people died of lung cancer in New Jersey last year, making it the top cancer-related death in the state. No wonder Big Tobacco is aggressively trolling for newer, younger recruits.

http://blog.nj.com/njv_editorial_page/2012/09/stop_flavored_cigar_smoking_by.html