



New Smokeless Tobacco Products a Concern As They Make Inroads in Indiana

The Great American Smokeout returns on Nov. 19, a day in which smokers and tobacco-products users are encouraged to stop, for at least one day – with the hope that they will quit completely.

Smoking is a serious problem in Indiana. A 2007 study by the Centers for Disease Control showed that smoking prevalence in Indiana is the sixth highest in the nation at 24.1% (the U.S. rate is 19.8%).

Local health officials hope that recent increases on cigarette taxes by both state and federal governments will negatively influence the smoking rate. But tobacco companies are fighting back by introducing an array of smokeless tobacco products, along with a barrage of advertising and promotions.

Brian Lucas, director of program promotion for the Ruth Lilly Health Education Center, reports that in 2008 alone, tobacco companies spent \$429 million for advertising and promotion just in Indiana. Nationwide, that amount totaled \$15 to \$16 billion in 2008.

“It’s hard to keep up with all the new products out there,” he recently told a group of professionals serving on committees for Drug Free Marion County.

A new category of products, dissolvable tobacco, debuted in Indiana just this year after being test-marketed in Indianapolis and other U.S. cities. These products are sold as strips, sticks and orbs, and deliver a shockingly high dose of nicotine. Depending on the brand and type, they contain 60 to 300 percent more nicotine than one cigarette.

Strips resemble breath-freshener strips, sticks look like a thick toothpick, and orbs mimic a brown-colored oval mint. All three products allow nicotine to be absorbed into the bloodstream as they dissolve in the mouth and are generally priced more reasonably than cigarettes.

Nicotine isn’t the only harmful element in dissolvable products – which don’t carry a list of ingredients on the packaging. Earlier this year, Indiana Tobacco Prevention and Cessation and anti-tobacco advocate and expert Jeffrey Wigand set up a lab at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, for the purpose of testing dissolvable tobacco products.

The results, which came back in September, showed that the CDC lab found coumarin, or rat poison, in the products. Coumarin has long been banned as a food additive by the US Food and Drug Administration.

What's even worse: the objects themselves and the packaging used to contain them resemble candy or mint packaging. If children use them, they run the risk of overdosing on nicotine. And while packages are advertised as "childproof," one recent guest at a conference Lucas attended said her three-year-old easily opened one. Kids also can easily hide these products in their pockets or mouths.

The good news: ITPC and Wigand are working diligently to get these products off the shelves. The FDA now is supposed to be regulating tobacco, and in fact, a new law just passed prohibiting the sale of flavored cigarettes. Lucas hopes to see the same thing happen to the sale of dissolvable tobacco products, perhaps even by the end of the year.