

News Release

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Report shows slower progress toward reducing teen tobacco use

Tobacco use by teens decreased at a slower rate between 2008 and 2011 and more than 50 percent of high-schoolers are still exposed to secondhand smoke

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) today released new information showing that after a decade of sharp declines in tobacco use among teens, progress is slowing. In addition, more than 50 percent of high school students are still exposed to secondhand smoke, despite the passage of the Freedom to Breathe Act in 2007. Equally concerning is that the use of menthol cigarettes has more than doubled among teen smokers since 2000. These findings are included in the report, *Teens and Tobacco in Minnesota 2011; Results from the Minnesota Youth Tobacco and Asthma Survey*.

"We've made great progress in reducing tobacco use since 2000, but the most recent findings in this new report give us little to celebrate," said Dr. Ed Ehlinger, Minnesota Commissioner of Health. "We are failing our youth when you consider that they use tobacco at higher rates than adults and are still being exposed to secondhand smoke. We are setting them up for a future of tobacco-related illness and premature death."

Ehlinger noted that tobacco use continues to be the nation's leading cause of preventable disease and death and that teens are especially vulnerable to picking up the habit. "Too many teens continue to be influenced by the tobacco industry's slick marketing tactics. It is critical that we step up our prevention efforts because 80 percent of adult smokers began when they were under 18," Ehlinger said.

Key findings from the report include:

- Between 2008 and 2011, the percentage of middle school students who used any tobacco products in the past 30 days declined from 6.9 percent to 5.6 percent. At the high school level, the percentage declined slightly from 27.0 percent to 25.8 percent. Neither of these decreases is statistically significant. In comparison, 22 percent of adults use tobacco.
- Progress in reducing exposure to secondhand smoke has slowed since 2008, after many years of strong declines. Exposure declined slightly between 2008 and 2011, from 55.4 to 52.5 percent for high school students and from 39.6 percent to 37.7 percent for middle school students.
- Among high school students, preference for menthols has more than doubled since 2000 and is continuing to rise; 47.3 percent of high school smokers usually smoke menthols today, compared to 39.1 percent in 2008 and 19.9 percent in 2000. Menthol appears to make it easier for young people to start smoking.
- One in seven high school students (14.3 percent) report that they have tried snus in their lifetime, and

4.9 percent report using snus in the last 30 days. Snus is a new smokeless tobacco product that comes in small pouches.

- More than one-fourth of high school students (28.6 percent) and 6.8 percent of middle school students report that they have tried flavored cigars and little cigars at some point in their lives. (The FDA recently banned candy flavors, fruit flavors, chocolate and other sweet flavors in cigarettes, but not cigar products.)
- The percentage of students who see or hear commercials about the dangers of smoking one or more times per week declined significantly between 2008 and 2011 for both middle school students (from 41.2 percent to 31.8 percent) and high school students (from 48.4 percent to 36.0 percent).
- The tobacco industry is increasingly active on popular social networking and video-sharing internet sites. One in four high school students (26.3 percent) report seeing videos or clips showing smoking most or some of the time on YouTube or other video-sharing sites, and 20.2 percent report seeing "pages" or "groups" for tobacco products on Facebook.

"This report demonstrates the need to maintain long-term teen tobacco prevention strategies," Ehlinger said. "If we rest on our laurels, we will continue to see our progress slow, or even reverse itself, and we cannot stand for that."

Ehlinger noted a number of strategies that public health officials across the country have used to successfully reduce and prevent youth tobacco use, including:

- Price increases on tobacco products.
- Counter-advertising mass-media campaigns that include TV and radio commercials, posters, and other media messages to counter pro-tobacco marketing.
- Comprehensive school-based tobacco-use prevention policies and programs, such as tobacco-free campuses.
- Community interventions that reduce tobacco advertising, promotions and commercial availability of tobacco products.

Ehlinger said MDH will continue working with partners across the state to explore all strategies for reducing teen tobacco use.

The department's Tobacco Prevention and Control Program administers grants to reduce tobacco use and exposure, works together with the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) and other community-based initiatives, and collaborates with statewide partners to reduce Minnesotans' exposure to secondhand smoke and to help people who use tobacco quit. In addition to working on multiple fronts to discourage youth tobacco use, the program works with diverse communities to eliminate health disparities caused by tobacco use and exposure.

SHIP, which was included in Minnesota's landmark 2008 health reform legislation, aims to help Minnesotans live longer, healthier lives by reducing the burden of chronic diseases caused by tobacco use and obesity.

Teens and Tobacco in Minnesota 2011; Results from the Minnesota Youth Tobacco and Asthma Survey can be found at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/tobacco/youth.html>.

About the survey described in the report:

The 2011 Minnesota Youth Tobacco and Asthma Survey is the latest in a series of youth tobacco surveys conducted by the Minnesota Department of Health. Previous surveys took place in 2000, 2002, 2005, and 2008. This survey provides current statewide information that can be used for education and planning by public and private sector programs aimed at reducing tobacco use. Topics covered include the extent of tobacco use, characteristics of smokers, secondhand smoke exposure, and media awareness. Public schools and classrooms across the state were selected at random for the 2011 survey, and 3,446 students in grades 6 through 12 participated.