

Curbing Addiction

Guest opinion
by Jeff Merkley

With hundreds of thousands of smokers dying each year, tobacco companies are expanding their product line to smokeless tobacco products that target a new batch of customers: young people.

Their creation? Tobacco candy – currently being test marketed in three cities across the country, including Portland. The candies come cleverly packaged in cell phone shaped containers. To a teacher or parent, these dangerous products look just like a phone in a student's pocket. To a child, they are an innocuous looking first step towards tobacco addiction.

The tobacco candies pop open like a Pez dispenser and come in one of two flavors – “mellow,” which tastes like caramel, or “fresh,” which tastes like mint. You suck on them for about 20 minutes and they dissolve, like a Tic-Tac or other candy. But this candy is made out of addictive, finely-ground tobacco.

They are fun, they are easy to hide from parents and teachers and they are very dangerous. Everywhere I go and talk about tobacco candy, people are outraged. Incredibly, the tobacco industry and its champions are trying to justify these flavored products with

the kid-friendly marketing as a “safe” alternative to smoking. This simply isn't so. This is not a safer tobacco – it is a product that, like cigarettes, when used as directed, causes cancer and kills.

In fact, the Surgeon General has determined that the use of smokeless tobacco can lead to oral cancer, gum disease and an increased risk of heart attacks. There is also an increased risk of esophageal and stomach cancers.

The Indiana Poison Control has estimated that each tobacco candy delivers 60-300 percent of the nicotine of a cigarette. These candies are addictive and they cause cancer. Fortunately, Congress is now taking steps to respond to the dangers of tobacco candy.

The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act will finally give the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the authority to regulate tobacco products. In addition, it includes an amendment I authored that will expedite the review of tobacco candy – an important first step in getting this product off the shelves.

It is frankly unbelievable that while we heavily regulate the production and sale of aspirin, a product that is as addictive and destructive as tobacco lacks regulatory oversight. We have an opportunity to finally solve this problem. But if we don't pass this bill and give the FDA authority to regulate this product, soon this tobacco candy will be coming to convenience stores all over the country.

It is a travesty that R.J. Reynolds can launch an addictive, carcinogenic candy targeted at children with no review from the FDA. Nicorette, designed to help you quit smoking, had to go to the FDA for approval.

But caramel or mint tobacco candy, designed to hook kids on tobacco, is on the shelves in Portland right now with zero oversight. And there is more to come. Reynolds has already announced they are planning to launch two new forms of tobacco candy: sticks, which are like toothpicks and strips, which are nearly identical to breath mint strips that dissolve on your tongue.

This Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act will finally bring some transparency and common sense to the regulation of tobacco.

Finally, the FDA will be able to address the single greatest public health menace in this country and prevent another generation of kids from falling prey to tobacco addiction.

Jeff Merkley is a U.S. Senator from Oregon. He sits on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and is partnering with Democrats and Republicans to tackle America's health care problems.



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