

Ohio's smoking rates may be on the rise

By Laura A. Bischoff, Staff Writer Updated 11:52 PM Sunday, November 22, 2009

COLUMBUS — Public health advocates foresee a perfect storm heading to Ohio next year that could increase smoking rates, gut enforcement of the indoor smoking ban and allow Big Tobacco to lure children into using new, mint-flavored tobacco products.

“We are poised to see our smoking rates rise if we don’t do something about it. It has happened in other states,” said Shelly Kiser of the American Lung Association.

Ohio’s adult smoking rate has already begun to creep up, from 20.1 percent in 2007 to 20.2 in 2008. Perhaps more troubling: A recent federal report ranked Ohio last among all 50 states when it comes to curbing tobacco sales to youths. The national average sales rate to minors is 9.9 percent, but Ohio’s rate is 17 percent.

Meanwhile, Ohio’s much-touted emphasis on curbing smoking has moved to a back burner. Thanks to budget raids, a politically popular property tax cut and a pending lawsuit, the state is in the process of gutting spending on smoking cessation and prevention, while enforcement of the voter-approved statewide indoor smoking ban has decreased.

This current fiscal year, which ends June 30, includes \$7.3 million for those efforts. Next year, it’ll drop off to \$2.8 million. Ten years ago, Ohio had plans for a \$1.2 billion endowment that would provide annual interest income to pay for anti-smoking programs well into the future.

Now, R.J. Reynolds is test-marketing dissolvable tobacco mint-flavored strips, sticks and orbs in Columbus. Although they are only to be sold to adults, school nurses across the state are on the lookout to see if the products, which are packaged like candy, get in the hands of teens.

“You certainly wouldn’t think these were anything but gum or mints in their hands,” Kiser said.

R.J. Reynolds spokesman David Howard dismissed allegations that the new smokeless tobacco products are aimed at children.

“That is completely false. We don’t in any way do that,” Howard said, noting that sales of orbs, sticks and strips are restricted by age and set behind store counters.