The Truth About Menthol Cigarettes

Menthol is a flavoring that can be derived naturally from mint plants or synthetically produced. This cool, minty and fresh flavor is often used in products like lip balm, cough medicine, mouth wash, and candy. Menthol is also used in cigarettes and makes smoking more appealing to young and beginning smokers.

A Public Health Threat

Easier to Inhale

The menthol flavor in cigarettes masks the harsh taste of tobacco and makes the smoke feel smoother and easier to inhale. This makes it easier for new smokers to start.

Menthol also allows smokers to inhale more deeply, which causes harmful particles to settle deeper inside the lungs.

Harder to Quit

Scientific studies show that the sensory effects and flavor of menthol can make cigarettes more addictive.

Menthol smokers show greater signs of nicotine dependence and are less likely to successfully quit smoking than other smokers.

Increasing Menthol Use

Although cigarette use is declining in the U.S., use of menthol cigarettes has increased in recent years, especially among young people and new smokers.

Approximately 19 million Americans smoke menthol cigarettes, including over 1 million adolescents.

While only 25% of all cigarettes sold in the U.S. are labeled as menthol, 90% of all tobacco cigarettes actually contain some menthol.

Young smokers often start with menthol cigarettes.
Disproportionate Marketing and Use

African American Communities

Tobacco industry documents reveal aggressive menthol tobacco product marketing and higher rates of discounts and promotions on menthol cigarette brands in African American neighborhoods.9 In California, 70% of African American adult cigarette smokers smoke menthol cigarettes, compared to only 18% of white adult cigarette smokers.10

LGBTQ Communities*

The tobacco industry has also targeted the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) community. Nearly 50% of all LGB adult cigarette smokers in California smoke menthol cigarettes, compared to only 28% of straight adult cigarette smokers.10

* Data were not available for people identifying as transgender or queer.

Youth

57% of smokers in the U.S. age 12–17 smoke menthol cigarettes.11

Protecting our Communities

A National study found that 44.5% of African Americans and 44% of women would quit smoking if menthol cigarettes were banned.12

Prohibiting the sale of menthol cigarettes is a critical step to preventing a new generation of Californians from becoming addicted to tobacco.

References

12. Tobacco Control Legal Consortium et al., Citizen Petition to Food and Drug Administration, Prohibiting Menthol As A Characterizing Flavor in Cigarettes (April 12, 2013).

©2017 California Department of Public Health, California Tobacco Control Program