

HEALTHY CHICAGO

TRANSFORMING THE HEALTH OF OUR CITY

CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

POLICY BRIEF

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MENTHOL-FLAVORED CIGARETTES

Introduction

Historically, fruity and sweet flavors were added to cigarettes by tobacco manufacturers in an effort to mask the harsh taste of tobacco. These flavors make tobacco products more appealing, especially to kids. In 2009, Congress passed the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (Act). While this landmark law banned other flavors in tobacco products, menthol remains on the market while the FDA deliberates regulatory action.

With 30% of the market share,¹ menthol is the most commonly used flavored tobacco product in the United States. In addition to masking the flavor of tobacco, menthol also provides a cooling sensation that is appealing to new, young smokers, according to the U.S. Surgeon General.² Though the Act did not ban menthol flavored cigarettes, it gave the U.S. Food and Drug Administration the power to ban menthol if “appropriate for the public health.”³

To ensure the FDA was advised about menthol and other smoking-related scientific issues, the Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee (TPSAC) was established. On July 21, 2011, TPSAC released “Menthol Cigarettes and Public Health: Review of the Scientific Evidence and Recommendations.” This Review outlined TPSAC’s findings on menthol cigarettes, concluding that it is “biologically plausible” that menthol makes cigarette smoking more addictive, and “removal of menthol cigarettes from the marketplace would benefit public health in the United States.”⁴

Although TPSAC found convincing evidence of the dangers of menthol cigarettes, they did not provide any specific suggestions for follow-up to the FDA. Citing a lack of FDA action, on April 12, 2013, twenty national public health organizations filed a Citizen Petition “urging the FDA to exercise its regulatory power” and protect Americans’ health by banning menthol.⁵

Soon after, on July 23, 2013, the FDA released their own report titled “Preliminary Scientific Evaluation of the Possible Public Health Effects of Menthol versus Non-menthol Cigarettes.” The FDA’s own report concluded that menthol cigarette use is associated with increased smoking initiation, greater addiction, greater signs of nicotine dependence, and decreased likelihood of quitting successfully, thus validating TPSAC’s findings from two years earlier. In addition, significant racial, gender and socioeconomic disparities were found in

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the use of menthol cigarettes.⁶ Recognizing significant public health issues associated with mentholated cigarettes, on July 25, 2013 — less than 48 hours after the FDA’s report was released — Mayor Rahm Emanuel took swift action, directing the Chicago Board of Health to seek local policy options for curbing the use of menthol cigarettes among youth.⁷

How does menthol flavoring increase the harm of smoking a cigarette?

The general population believes that menthol cigarettes are healthier than other types of cigarettes, thus reducing cessation efforts.⁸ Menthol may also inhibit the metabolism of nicotine, resulting in higher rates of addiction.⁹ Through suppression of respiratory irritation, menthol may facilitate smoke inhalation and promote nicotine addiction and smoking-related morbidities.¹⁰

Does the tobacco industry specifically target mentholated products to youth and racial/ethnic communities?

Data suggests that companies that sell menthol cigarettes target minorities and kids with their advertising.^{11, 12, 13} The most popular tobacco product among youth is the menthol crush.¹⁴

Are youth and minority populations more likely to use menthol cigarettes?

Menthol contributes to the appeal and addiction potential of smoking in youth.¹⁵ Derived from the peppermint plant, menthol provides a minty flavor and cooling sensation in cigarettes, covering up the tobacco taste and reducing the throat irritation associated with smoking, particularly among first-time users. The anesthetic cooling effect of menthol facilitates initiation and early persistence of smoking by youth.¹⁶ The National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 47.7% of all adolescent smokers smoke menthol.¹⁷ The prevalence use of menthol-flavored cigarettes among kids (ages 12-17) is staggering, with disproportionate rates being evident across the community: 72% of African Americans, 51% of Asians, 47% of Hispanics and 41% of Whites; as well as 71% among young LGBT smokers.¹⁸ The trend continues into young adulthood, with 85% of African American smokers, 38.2% of Hispanics, and 35.8% of Asians using a mentholated brand compared to 28.8% of Whites.¹⁹ At the Federal level, a menthol ban could prevent up to 600,000 smoking-related deaths by 2050, a third of these from the African American community.²⁰

Are menthol cigarettes more addictive and difficult to quit?

Among adult menthol users, menthol cigarette use (vs. non-menthol) is associated with a lower likelihood of making a quit attempt and higher rates of relapse.²¹ In addition, menthol smokers have higher physical nicotine dependence and smoking urge, despite smoking the same number of cigarettes as non-menthol users.²² The FDA’s most recent report reaffirmed these findings. Specifically, the FDA’s 2013 report found that menthol in cigarettes is likely associated with increased smoking initiation and greater addiction and that “menthol smokers show greater signs of nicotine dependence and are less likely to successfully quit smoking.”²³

Would restrictions on menthol-flavored cigarettes cause a backlash from any minority groups?

Because the FDA is considering a ban on menthol cigarettes, many researchers have been studying how different groups would respond to such a proposal. For example, when researchers asked current smokers how they might respond to a Federal ban on menthol cigarettes, 35% said they would stop smoking.²⁴ Another opinion poll found



that 28.2% of adults opposed, 20.0% supported, and 51.9% lacked a strong opinion about a Federal menthol ban. It also found that support restricting menthol was highest among Hispanics (36.4%), African Americans (29.0%), non-smokers (26.8%), and participants with less than a high school education (28.8%).²⁵ Because support for a menthol ban is strongest among populations with the highest prevalence of menthol cigarette use, a ban could motivate many menthol smokers to quit and reduce tobacco-related disease and death. In fact, researchers estimate, one-third of lives that would be saved by restricting the sale of menthol cigarettes would be African Americans.²⁰

Citations

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