

Menthol Fact Sheet

Overview/Definition

- Menthol is an ingredient found in most cigarettes. Some cigarettes use menthol in greater quantities as a flavoring additive, and market and advertise those brands as “menthol”.¹ Menthol was the first major additive to cigarettes back in the 1920s and 1930s, becoming widespread in the 1950s and 1960s.²
- A chemical compound extracted from the peppermint plant, menthol is thought to help mask the harshness of cigarette smoke due to its characteristic cooling effects on the mouth and throat.^{2,3}

Prevalence

- National survey data showed that in 2006, 43.8% of current smokers aged 12-17 years reported using menthol cigarettes, compared to 35.6% of smokers aged 18 to 24 years and 30.6% of smokers older than 35 years.⁴
- Menthol products accounted for approximately one-fifth of the United States cigarette market in 2006.⁵
- Despite a 22% decline in overall packs sold, menthol cigarette sales remained stable from 2000 to 2005 in the United States.⁴

Industry Targeting and Manipulation

- The tobacco industry has a well-documented history of developing and marketing mentholated brands to racial and ethnic minorities and youth. The court’s findings in *United States v. Philip Morris* illustrate that tobacco companies:
 - Marketed menthol cigarettes as healthier as part of their “health reassurance” campaigns;
 - Used menthol cigarettes as “starter products” directed at youth; and
 - Actively pursued the development of a significant market for menthol in minority communities, particularly African-Americans.⁶

African American Menthol Use

- Of current smokers who are black, approximately 80% smoke menthol cigarettes.⁷
- Evidence from tobacco industry documents also shows that tobacco companies have specifically targeted African Americans with menthol cigarette advertising.⁸ An analysis of cigarette ads appearing in magazines targeted to Black and Hispanic consumers found that, between 1998 and 2002, the magazine *Ebony* was 9.8 times more likely than *People* magazine to contain ads for menthol cigarettes. The Spanish language version of *People* magazine was 2.6 times more likely to contain ads for menthol cigarettes than the English language version.⁹
- Because African American smokers have lower cessation rates than other smokers, some researchers have theorized that menthol may make it harder to quit smoking. Evidence remains inconclusive.

Menthol: A Starter Product for Youth

- Menthol cigarettes are more common among newer, younger smokers and smokers of menthols have been shown to have significantly higher scores on a scale of nicotine dependence when compared with nonmenthol smokers in the same age group.¹⁰

- Evidence from tobacco industry documents shows that the industry studied smokers' menthol preferences and manipulated menthol levels, thereby appealing to a variety of smokers, particularly adolescents and young adults.⁴ Menthol reduces the harshness of cigarette smoke which may be more appealing to young, inexperienced smokers.⁴
- Studies have found that adolescent menthol smokers are more likely to report symptoms of dependence than non-menthol smokers.¹⁰⁻¹²

Menthol and Addiction?

- Some have theorized, and some research suggests, that menthol may play a role in nicotine addiction and may make it harder to quit smoking, based on lower cessation rates among African American smokers and a higher likelihood of reporting nicotine dependence among adolescent menthol smokers than adolescent non-menthol smokers; however, studies have reached conflicting conclusions.¹⁰⁻¹⁷
- Some studies found that menthol smoking was associated with lower quit rates or higher relapse rates;^{13,14} however, other studies found that smoking menthol cigarettes was not linked to lower quit rates.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

SOURCES

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