



Everything Jersey

Menthol cigarettes make quitting smoking more difficult, new study finds

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Seth Augenstein/The Star-Ledger

By



Chris Goodney/Bloomberg

A pack of Marlboro menthol cigarettes is arranged in this April file photo. A new study found menthol cigarettes are more addictive than non-menthol ones.

A new study, coming amid an ongoing controversy over the possible ban of menthol cigarettes, concludes that the mint-flavored cigarettes are harder to quit than regular smokes.

The findings, released today by researchers at The Cancer Institute of New Jersey, found menthol smokers had far more trouble kicking the habit – especially among minorities.

While the reasons are still subject to debate, Jonathan Foulds, a professor of public health sciences and psychiatry at the Penn State College of Medicine, believes an anesthetic effect in menthol cigarettes allows smokers to inhale more nicotine. His theory is that groups with less money reach out for their fix in the most economic way possible.

"It's clear that people smoke their cigarettes differently, based on their socioeconomic situation," he said. "Menthol makes the poison go down smoother."

The study, published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, examined the entire national smoking population, and focused in on specific subgroups, such as those trying to quit.

Menthol smokers showed lower quit rates, and the relationship was noted among whites, blacks and Puerto Ricans, according to the research. But it was more telling among minorities.

"We defined our denominator or study population five different ways, considering things like quit attempts and the use of other tobacco products," said the report's author Cristine Delnevo, director of the Center for Tobacco Surveillance and Evaluation Research for The Cancer Institute at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. "The association was robust and consistent, as well as more pronounced among blacks and Puerto Ricans."

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Menthol was found to be generally more common among younger smokers and females. But the most pronounced effect of the lower quit rate was on minorities. More than 70 percent of black smokers in the U.S. were menthol smokers, and even more in New Jersey, where the rate was about 80 percent.

About 21 percent of white smokers smoked menthols.

One of the newest revelations about menthol smoking by race was the Puerto Rican population, which at more than 60 percent of smokers, was significantly higher than other Latino groups, such as Mexicans at 20 percent.

The study also concluded menthol smoking decreased independently of race with increased education, income and age.

The new study, partly funded by an FDA grant, comes amid a controversy over the minty smokes. Other flavored cigarettes were banned in

2009 by the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, which focused on the targeting of younger populations by added flavor choices. The FDA is considering a full ban on menthol cigarettes since the group's Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee recommended in March that a "removal of menthol cigarettes from the marketplace would benefit public health in the United States."

Lorillard, maker of the Newport brand, declined comment on the study until it could be reviewed. However, the company rebuts the alleged dangers of menthol, and has opposed any menthol ban. It also filed suit in February against the advisory committee, alleging conflicts of interest among some of its members. The company also runs a website that strenuously lays out its position on the topic — and predicts a possible black-market backlash if the roughly 30 percent of cigarettes in the country are outlawed.

"Lorillard believes that the scientific evidence does not show that menthol in cigarettes is harmful, and that Americans have a right to make a personal choice to use any legal product," the website says. "Prohibition of menthol cigarettes would lead to the illegal sale of more dangerous cigarettes through an unprecedented underground market."

Tobacco health experts say marketing of the various menthol brands has been targeted at African-Americans. Researchers at the Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program at the University of California found in a 2004 review of tobacco companies' records shows an "African Americanization" of menthol cigarettes by the tobacco industry. Delnevo agrees.

"It is clear the industry has been marketing menthol to African-Americans for at least 40 years," Delnovo said.

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