

What Is Menthol?

Menthol is a substance naturally found in mint plants, such as peppermint and spearmint. It gives a cooling sensation and is often used to relieve minor pain and irritation. Menthol is added to products as a flavoring including cough drops, beverages, gum and candy. However, none of these products are smoked or inhaled when used. Tobacco companies on the other hand, are using this natural plant in cigarettes and other electronic nicotine devices, making smokers think that menthol makes the product less harmful when used. These nicotine products are not safer when menthol is added to them.



Why do tobacco companies use menthol in the cigarettes?

Tobacco companies use menthol to help smokers tolerate cigarette smoke they inhale by trying to soothe the throat and airways with menthol. Advertisements emphasize the cool and refreshing taste of menthol cigarettes. The ads often show images of nature, springtime, water, and other refreshing qualities. This is how tobacco companies target “beginner” smokers, smokers with health concerns, and minority groups. The soothing taste makes a cigarette more appealing, especially to teens between 12 and 17 years of age, and is frequently the “starter” product for people who become chronic cigarette users.

In particular, African Americans have long been the target of ads, discount coupons, and free samples for menthol cigarettes. Menthol allows many smokers to take easier and deeper inhalations and feel less irritation in their throat while smoking. Menthol is currently the *only* flavor that can be added to conventional cigarettes by law. Menthol cigarettes represent about 25% (one quarter) of the total combustible cigarette market.

What is the harm in smoking mentholated cigarettes?

There is no evidence that cigarettes, cigars, or smokeless tobacco products that have menthol are safer than other cigarettes. In fact smoking menthol cigarettes, like other cigarettes, can lead to a number of health issues including heart and lung disease and cancers. In the last decade, after many public efforts to promote smoking cessation, the use of non-menthol cigarettes has declined, while menthol cigarette use has remained the same. Smoking mentholated cigarettes makes it much harder to stop smoking.

Menthol and Addiction

Studies show higher rates of tobacco (nicotine) addiction while using mentholated cigarettes compare to cigarettes that do not contain menthol. Menthol reduces the metabolism (breakdown by the body) of nicotine. It also slows one’s breathing and enhances nicotine’s presence in the lungs. Even if a smoker is smoking less using a mentholated cigarette, he or she is just as likely to experience smoking-related diseases and premature death.

Mentholated Cigarettes use in African American Population

African Americans have been viewed by the tobacco industry as a group with significant market growth potential and have been one of the main target groups of menthol cigarette advertising. There is some evidence that African American people are less inclined to smoke cigarettes than other groups and they tend to start smoking later in life. The average age for African American teens to start smoking is 16.9 years versus 15.7 years for the rest of population. To attract African American youth, the tobacco industry has designed targeted marketing such as placing more advertisements for menthol cigarettes in magazines with a largely African American readership, and providing discount coupons and free samples of menthol cigarettes at sports and music events with large African American attendance. More than 80% of African-American smokers currently use mentholated cigarettes.

African Americans suffer higher rates of smoking related health problems, even though they smoke at similar rates as white Americans. Smoking menthol cigarettes is also linked with higher risks of disease and lower rates of cessation, especially among African American smokers.

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Rx Action Plan

- ✓ Support legislation to remove menthol from cigarettes.
- ✓ Take steps that make it harder for youth to use tobacco, such as reaching out to legislators to raise cigarette prices, enforce laws that prohibit the sale of tobacco to children, and support Tobacco 21 that seeks to raise the age for purchase of tobacco products. For more information, see "Tobacco 21" handout at www.thoracic.org/patients
- ✓ Get help to stopping smoking. Switch off of menthol containing products and use treatments for nicotine dependence. For more help, view smoking cessation handouts at www.thoracic.org/patients

Doctor's Office Telephone:

Resources:

Smokefree.gov

<https://smokefree.gov>

CDC's Office on Smoking and Health

<https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/index.htm>

U.S. National Library of Medicine. Pub Med Health. Medications for quitting tobacco use.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth>

U.S. Food and Drug Administration. FDA 101: Smoking Cessation Products. January 2010. FDA (Food and Drug Administration) Consumer Health Information.

<http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm198176.htm>

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