

## 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”.<sup>1</sup> Menthol was the first major additive to cigarettes back in the 1920s and 1930s, becoming widespread in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>2</sup>
- 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.<sup>2,3</sup>

## 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.<sup>4</sup>
- Menthol products accounted for approximately one-fifth of the United States cigarette market in 2006.<sup>5</sup>
- Despite a 22% decline in overall packs sold, menthol cigarette sales remained stable from 2000 to 2005 in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

## 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:
  - o Marketed menthol cigarettes as healthier as part of their “health reassurance” campaigns;
  - o Used menthol cigarettes as “starter products” directed at youth; and
  - o Actively pursued the development of a significant market for menthol in minority communities, particularly African-Americans.<sup>6</sup>

## African American Menthol Use

- o Of current smokers who are black, approximately 80% smoke menthol cigarettes.<sup>7</sup>
- o Evidence from tobacco industry documents also shows that tobacco companies have specifically targeted African Americans with menthol cigarette advertising.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>
- o 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

- o 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.<sup>10</sup>
- o 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.<sup>4</sup> Menthol reduces the harshness of cigarette smoke which may be more appealing to young, inexperienced smokers.<sup>4</sup>
- o Studies have found that adolescent menthol smokers are more likely to report symptoms of dependence than non-menthol smokers.<sup>10-12</sup>

## 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.<sup>10-17</sup>
- Some studies found that menthol smoking was associated with lower quit rates or higher relapse rates;<sup>13,14</sup> however, other studies found that smoking menthol cigarettes was not linked to lower quit rates.<sup>15-17</sup>

## SOURCES

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