

Lifelines



from the National Cancer Institute

Menthol Cigarettes Not Less Harmful, say Experts

By the National Cancer Institute

Smoking causes more preventable deaths (from lung cancer, heart and lung disease, other cancers, and chronic illness) than any other single behavioral factor--an estimated 443,000 deaths each year. It is projected that more than 23,000 African-Americans will be diagnosed with lung cancer in 2011, with most of these cases caused by smoking.

Lung cancer can be treated, but rarely cured. For African-Americans with lung cancer, the five-year survival rate is only 13 percent. Indeed, lung cancer kills more African Americans than any other cancer.

Smoking harms nearly every organ of the body and diminishes a person's overall health. Millions of Americans have health problems caused by smoking, a leading cause of cancer and death from cancer. Smoking causes many types of cancer including cancer of the lung, esophagus, larynx, mouth, throat, kidney, bladder, pancreas, stomach, and cervix, as well as acute myeloid leukemia. Smoking also causes heart disease, stroke, aortic aneurysm (a balloon-like bulge in an artery in the chest), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, hip fractures, and cataracts.

Regardless of their age, people who quit smoking are less likely to die from illnesses caused by smoking than those who continue smoking. Studies show that smokers who quit at about age 30 reduce their chance of dying prematurely from smoking-caused diseases by more than 90 percent. The risk of dying is cut in half for those who stop smoking at age 50, and even people who quit at about age 60 or older live longer and have healthier lives than those who continue to smoke.

The nicotine in tobacco is addictive and makes it very difficult to quit. Nicotine dependence is the most common form of addiction in the country. Seventy percent of the 45 million current U.S. smokers report they want to quit completely, and the vast majority of these have tried to quit smoking at least once.

Menthol Cigarettes Not Less Hazardous, May Be Harder To Quit

Research shows that menthol cigarettes have been especially targeted to youth and African-Americans. Many more African-American adult (83 percent) and youth (72 percent) smokers smoke menthol cigarettes than white smokers (20 percent).

Menthol's cooling and anesthetic properties reduce some of the irritation and harshness of tobacco smoke. Experts believe that menthol cigarettes may increase experimentation, progression to regular smoking, and addiction among youth, and decrease the likelihood of cessation among African-American adults. Many menthol smokers, especially African-Americans, believe that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than other cigarettes. But in fact menthol cigarettes are not less hazardous, despite what the tobacco industry implies in their marketing.

Earlier this year, a government advisory committee conducted a comprehensive review of menthol cigarettes and concluded that "menthol cigarettes have an adverse impact on public health in the United States."

Smoking Quitline

Talk with an NCI smoking cessation counselor for help quitting and to get answers to smoking-related questions in English or Spanish. Call 1-877-44U-QUIT (1-877-448-7848) toll free within the United States, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern Time. Information and assistance to help with quitting are also available at www.smokefree.gov.

*NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. NCI funded a special Supplement to the scientific journal, *Addiction*, where much of this research on menthol appears. Other resources and more information about cancer and smoking are available, please visit the NCI web site at www.cancer.gov or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.*