Lifelines
from the National Cancer Institute

Popular in African American Community, Menthol Cigarettes & Flavored Cigars No Less Addictive or Deadly

By the National Cancer Institute

Everyone knows that smoking is deadly in any form. Smoking kills more than 440,000 people each year. It can cause lung cancer and at least 10 other types of cancer, heart disease, stroke, cataracts, and a host of lung diseases. In fact, smoking causes more preventable deaths—deaths that would not otherwise happen—than any other single behavior.

The impact of cigarettes on the African American community has been nothing short of devastating: African Americans have among the highest rates of new lung cancer diagnoses, most of which are caused by smoking. And lung cancer kills more African Americans than any other cancer.

Among African Americans, two tobacco products are particularly popular and, as a result, particularly dangerous: menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars.

Menthol Cigarettes: "Cool" but Lethal

When it comes to cigarettes, one thing is clear: In the African American community, menthol rules. More than 80 percent of African American smokers smoke menthol cigarettes, compared with 20 percent of white smokers, explains Dr. Michele Bloch of NCI's Tobacco Control Research Branch.

And many menthol smokers, especially African Americans, mistakenly believe that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than other cigarettes, notes Dr. Valerie Yerger, a tobacco researcher at the University of California San Francisco and a founding member of the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council.

This belief dates back to the 1940s and 1950s, Dr. Yerger continues, when menthol cigarettes "were promoted as a healthier alternative to regular cigarettes, especially for smokers who had a cold or sore throat."

Menthol has "cooling and numbing properties that make tobacco smoke less irritating and harsh," adds Dr. Bloch. "Research has shown that menthol in cigarettes may increase the likelihood of experimentation and progression to daily use of cigarettes. And, menthol in cigarettes is likely associated with increased addiction."

People who smoke menthol cigarettes also appear to have a harder time quitting smoking, especially if they are African American.

In one study, for example, researchers found that African American and Hispanic smokers who used menthol cigarettes were much less likely to successfully quit smoking than African Americans and Hispanics who used nonmenthol cigarettes. This was the case even though the menthol smokers in the study tended to smoke less than the nonmenthol smokers.

Flavored Cigars: Don't Let the Taste Fool You

Overall, fewer people in the United States smoke now than in the past, thanks to education campaigns about the dangers of smoking; federal, state, and local laws and regulations that have banned smoking in public places and imposed hefty taxes on cigarettes; and efforts to help people quit.

However, researchers are concerned that some of the drop in cigarette smoking rates has been offset by an increase in the number of people, especially young people, who smoke flavored cigars. These miniature cigars come in flavors like chocolate—by far the most popular— strawberry, and vanilla. And, compared with cigarettes, these small cigars are cheap. Although cigarettes with certain "characterizing flavors"—i.e., chocolate, strawberry, cinnamon—are banned by the Food and Drug Administration, small cigars have not been.

Flavored cigars are sold in many markets and convenience stores in African American communities, and they now represent about half of cigar sales in these types of stores. Enticing flavors, sugar-based additives, and rock-bottom prices likely explain much of the huge increase in the popularity of flavored cigars, particularly among adolescents and teens. In fact, sales of flavored cigars increased 250 percent between 1997 and 2007.

And this trend seems likely to continue. According to a November 2013 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 17 percent of African American high school students smoked cigars in 2012. That is twice the number reported just several years earlier.

The increased popularity of little cigars is not only influenced by their cheap price, the CDC said, but also "the marketing...that might appeal to youths."

These statistics are a serious concern to public health officials.

"Little cigars contain the same toxic and cancer-causing ingredients found in cigarettes and are not a safe alternative to cigarettes," warns Dr. Tim McAfee, director of the CDC Office on Smoking and Health.

Getting Help to Quit: Call a Quitline

Regardless of their age, people who quit smoking are less likely to die from illnesses caused by smoking than those who continue smoking, Dr. Bloch stresses.

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

There are many ways to get free help to quit smoking. One place to start is by calling NCI's Smoking Quitline at 1-877-44U-QUIT (1-877-448-7848) toll free within the United States. Smoking cessation counselors are available to answer smoking-related questions in English or Spanish, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., Eastern Time. Or you can call 1–800–QUIT–NOW (1–800–784–8669) to be routed to your state's quitline.

Information and assistance to help with quitting, including a free text-messaging service, 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. For more information about cancer, 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**.