Are Menthol Cigarettes a Starter Product for Youth?


Menthol is a flavoring agent that is sprayed on tobacco to produce menthol cigarettes. It stimulates cold receptors, providing a sensation of coolness. Its cooling effects may contribute to reduced perception of irritation from cigarette smoke and enable new smokers to inhale smoke more deeply. At the time this paper was written there was speculation, but little hard evidence, that menthol might increase the addictiveness of cigarettes for new smokers and youth.

This study assessed the relationship between menthol use and nicotine dependence. Data from the National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS) indicated that menthol cigarette use was significantly more common among newer, younger smokers. This study was the first to demonstrate an “age gradient” in smoking of menthol cigarettes, with younger and newer smokers more likely to smoke them than older youth and youth who have smoked for a longer period of time. This finding has since been replicated in 8 of 10 studies on the issue (reviewed in Hersey, Nonnemake & Homsi, Nicotine & Tobacco Research 12 (Suppl. 2):S136-146, 2010).

Additionally, our study found, again for the first time, that youth who smoked menthol cigarettes had significantly higher scores on a scale of nicotine dependence compared with youth who smoked nonmenthol cigarettes, controlling for demographic background and the length, frequency, and level of smoking.

The findings suggest that menthol cigarettes are a starter product that may be associated with smoking uptake by youth. This study and subsequent studies recently led the Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee of the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Tobacco Products to conclude that menthol cigarettes contribute to the addictiveness of cigarettes among young smokers.

Link: http://ntr.oxfordjournals.org/content/8/3/403.abstract