

Flavoured tobacco

The truth behind the sugarcoated poison

- Tobacco companies add flavours, such as menthol, fruit and candy, into tobacco products to reduce the harshness and bitterness of nicotine, and improve palatability. E-cigarettes and waterpipe tobacco are available in a particularly wide variety of flavours.
- Flavoured tobacco products are often perceived as less harmful and more attractive than non-flavoured ones. Flavours are a key factor of smoking experimentation and continuation in young people and females.
- Besides adding flavourings directly into tobacco products, tobacco companies have developed capsule cigarettes and accessories that allow smokers to add flavours into tobacco products on their own, increasing the appeal or circumventing regulations.
- Over 40 countries/territories have banned all flavours, including menthol, in cigarettes, such as Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) countries.



Menthol cigarettes

Effects of menthol

- The cooling effect can mask the unpleasant smell of tobacco smoke.
- The anesthetic effect can suppress natural defense reactions of the body to nicotine and tobacco smoke, such as sore throat and coughs.
- Menthol makes quitting harder by facilitating nicotine addiction.

Strategies to promote menthol cigarettes

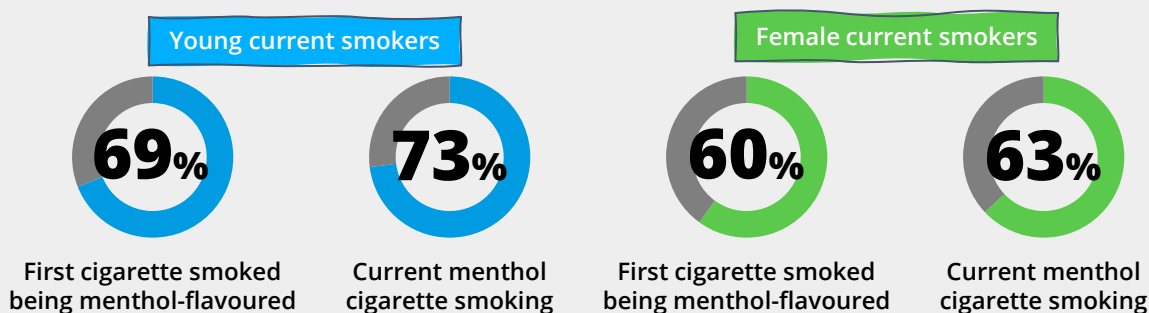
- Tobacco companies manipulate the menthol content to address different preferences of smokers, facilitating addiction.
- Menthol cigarettes are marketed as “healthier”. The marketing is misleading, and targets at young people and females.

Public impact

- Non-smokers may try smoking due to the misleading marketing. A U.S. study found that youth and young adults who had a menthol cigarette at first smoking were 88% and 66% more likely to become daily smokers, respectively.
- Smokers may wish to quit due to the harshness of tobacco smoke, health concerns and social unacceptability, but deceptive marketing of the tobacco industry may keep them smoking.

Menthol cigarette smoking in Hong Kong

- Menthol cigarettes account for only 10% of the global cigarette market, but over 40% of smokers in Hong Kong smoke menthol cigarettes. The proportion in Hong Kong is among the highest in the world.
- In 2023, young current smokers who smoked menthol cigarettes increased by 30%, comparing to 2021.



The tobacco industry uses flavours to promote smoking

Internal documents of the tobacco industry reveal that it understands the appeal of flavoured tobacco. It develops flavoured products to attract young people and females to smoking, and to retain smokers who wish to quit.

As you know, this flavourant appears to have significant appeal among the 18-24-year-old smoker group and this is obviously the group that we desperately are after.

Young women, much more so than men, would be likely to smoke a flavoured cigarette.

Quitters may be discouraged from quitting, or at least kept in the market longer, by either of the two product opportunities (menthol cigarettes or less irritating cigarettes) noted before. A less irritating cigarette is one route.

Suggestions regarding flavoured tobacco regulations

- The World Health Organization (WHO) suggests to prohibit flavourings, colourings, vitamins and other additives in tobacco products to reduce attractiveness of tobacco products, reduce misperceptions that “flavoured tobacco is less harmful”, and prevent smoking in specific populations (e.g. young people and females).



- Parties should regulate, by **prohibiting or restricting** ingredients that may be used to **increase palatability in tobacco products**.
- Parties should regulate **ingredients in tobacco products that may create the impression that they have a health benefit**.

Article 9 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

- A flavour ban should cover all tobacco products and all flavours including menthol to avoid smokers from switching to other products instead of quitting.
- Flavour accessories should also be banned to avoid the tobacco industry from exploiting loopholes.

Over 40 countries/territories have banned flavoured cigarettes



Antigua and Barbuda, Bermuda*, Canada, Cabo Verde, Congo, Ethiopia, 27 European Union countries (e.g. France, Germany, Spain), Mauritania, Mauritius, Moldova, Niger*, Nigeria, Norway, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States*

* Not include menthol cigarettes

Experience of Canada – Effectively reduces youth smoking and encourages quitting

Background

Due to increasing use of flavoured cigarettes, the Canadian Government has banned all flavours other than menthol in cigarettes, little cigars and blunt wraps since 2010. Since menthol flavours were exempted from the flavour ban, menthol cigarette smoking remained common in high school students.

The Canadian Government extended the ban to cover menthol flavours in 2017, and further to all menthol and clove tobacco products in 2018.

Effectiveness

The cigarette smoking prevalence of Canadian adolescents aged 15-19 years old reduced from 13.0% in 2009 (pre-ban) to 11.8% in 2011 after the partial flavour ban was implemented. After the ban was extended to menthol flavours, the prevalence significantly reduced to 5.1% in 2019, showing the effectiveness of a complete flavour ban in reducing youth smoking.

After menthol cigarettes were banned, adult daily cigarette smokers had 62% higher likelihood of successful quitting than non-menthol smokers. Neither did the number of illicit cigarettes seized nor illicit menthol cigarette smoking show significant changes after the ban.

Misleading arguments by the tobacco industry vs Facts

Misleading arguments



Increasing illicit tobacco trade

According to the WHO, the tobacco industry constantly opposes tobacco control policies by exaggerating the illicit tobacco market. Research has shown no increase in illicit cigarette purchase in Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom after flavoured cigarettes were banned. Another research also showed no significant increase in the number of illicit cigarettes seized in Canada.



Limiting freedom of choice

“Freedom of choice” is rhetoric of the tobacco industry to hide the intention to drive people addicted for its own business interest, while shifting the responsibility for harms of smoking to smokers. The industry deliberately develops flavoured tobacco products with various flavours and colourful packages to attract young people, and facilitates addiction by manipulating the menthol content. This hinders smoking cessation, impairing freedom of smokers to choose to live healthily.



Affecting the economy, especially the tourism industry

Over 40 countries/territories have banned flavoured cigarettes, indicating a global trend in tobacco control. The impact on the tourism industry shall be minimal. In Canada, the international overnight arrivals increased from 19.98 million in 2016 to an all-time high of 21.13 million in 2018, after the menthol cigarette ban. This indicates that the ban did not weaken visit intention. As another example, the tobacco industry argued that the smoke-free legislation implemented in Hong Kong in 2007 would affect the catering industry by banning smoking in indoor public places. The business of the catering industry actually improved after the legislation. In fact, smoking leads to an economic loss of HK\$8.2-9.9 billion and nearly 14,000 deaths in Hong Kong every year.



Discriminating young people and females

Tobacco is a lethal product that one in every two smokers dies prematurely from smoking. Any tobacco control measure targets to protect public health. Attracting young people and females to smoking the addictive and lethal products with flavourings, the tobacco industry is the culprit of harming them. As most smokers start smoking before 21 years old, banning flavoured tobacco can help prevent smoking initiation in young people, and is vital to tobacco control.