



## IMPACT OF MENTHOL CIGARETTES ON YOUTH SMOKING INITIATION AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

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Cigarettes with specific characterizing flavors were prohibited in the U.S. on September 22, 2009, as part of the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (TCA) that gave the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authority over tobacco products.<sup>1</sup> This provision excluded menthol cigarettes, which make up more than a quarter of the cigarette market in the United States, and pose tremendous public health harms.<sup>2</sup> The FDA has determined that menthol cigarettes lead to increased smoking initiation among youth and young adults, greater addiction and decreased success in quitting smoking.<sup>3</sup> Further, FDA's Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee's (TPSAC)\* concluded, "**Removal of menthol cigarettes from the marketplace would benefit public health in the United States.**"<sup>4</sup>

### Menthol Makes it Easier for Youth to Initiate Tobacco Use

The tobacco companies know that almost all new tobacco users begin their addiction as kids, but they also know that to novice smokers, tobacco can be harsh and unappealing. Internal tobacco industry documents show that tobacco companies have a long history of using flavors to reduce the harshness of their products to make them more appealing to new users, almost all of whom are under age 18.<sup>5</sup> By masking the harshness and soothing the irritation caused by tobacco smoke, flavors make it easier for beginners – primarily kids – to experiment with the product and ultimately become addicted. Menthol has particularly appealing qualities for novice smokers. Menthol is a chemical compound that cools and numbs the throat, reducing the harshness of cigarette smoke, thereby making menthol cigarettes more appealing to youth who are initiating tobacco use.<sup>6</sup> As TPSAC noted, "Menthol cannot be considered merely a flavoring additive to tobacco. Its pharmacological actions reduce the harshness of smoke and the irritation from nicotine."<sup>7</sup> According to TPSAC's conclusions:<sup>8</sup>

- Menthol cigarettes increase the number of children who experiment with cigarettes and the number of children who become regular smokers, increasing overall youth smoking.
- Young people who initiate using menthol cigarettes are more likely to become addicted and become long-term daily smokers.

As the only flavored cigarette left on the market, it is no surprise that menthol cigarettes remain popular among youth. In fact, a study analyzing the impact of the 2009 ban on characterizing flavors in cigarettes on youth tobacco use found that use of menthol cigarettes among high schoolers significantly increased after the ban.<sup>9</sup> National data clearly demonstrates the popularity of menthol cigarettes among youth:

- Youth smokers are more likely to use menthol cigarettes than any other age group. Over half (54 percent) of youth smokers ages 12-17 use menthol cigarettes, compared to less than one-third of smokers ages 35 and older.<sup>10</sup>
- Prevalence of menthol use is even higher among African American youth: seven out of ten African-American youth smokers smoke menthol cigarettes.<sup>11</sup>

\* TPSAC is a group of scientific experts charged with advising the Commissioner of Food and Drugs on safety, dependence, and health issues relating to tobacco. See <https://www.fda.gov/advisoryCommittees/CommitteesMeetingMaterials/tobacoproductsScientificAdvisoryCommittee/default.htm> for more details.