Menthol Cigarettes May Make it Harder for Minorities to Quit Smoking

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Mint-flavored additives that make menthol cigarettes so cool tasting also make them harder to quit, especially for African Americans and Puerto Ricans, according to a new study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* and reported by MedlinePlus.

We all know that smoking cigarettes is addictive and increases the risks of lung cancer, heart disease and stroke, but are menthol-flavored butts harder to put down? To find out, researchers from the Cancer Institute of New Jersey and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey's School of Public Health examined current and former smokers to determine if those who smoked menthol cigarettes were less likely to quit than non-menthol smokers. In addition, study authors also wanted to see whether their findings differed by race or ethnicity.

Scientists analyzed tobacco use data from National Cancer Institute surveys from 2003 and 2006 to 2007. Findings revealed clear age, gender-based, racial and ethnic disparities for menthol cigarette use. Females and young adults ages 18 to 24 were the largest group of mentholated cigarette smokers; about 72 percent of black smokers also puffed menthols compared with about 28 percent of Latino smokers; and 21 percent of white smokers.

What's more, among Latino smokers, there were also marked differences. Those of Puerto Rican heritage most commonly smoked menthol cigarettes (62 percent) compared with smokers of Mexican origin (19.9 percent) and others with Latino roots (26.5 percent).

But the findings spotlighted researchers' biggest concern: the addictiveness of menthol cigarettes. The study determined that across all racial/ethnic groups, menthol cigarette smokers were less likely to quit. More important, these results were more pronounced for African-American and Puerto Rican smokers—after being introduced to menthols, these groups had the hardest time quitting.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Tobacco Products is considering a ban on menthol cigarettes, so it will be interesting to see how these findings affect that likelihood.

But for researchers, the deliberations are done. "The recent calls to ban this flavoring would be prudent and evidence-based," scientists said in a University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey statement.

Click here for quit-smoking tips and more about how menthols target black youth.

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