

Menthol cigarettes marketed in 'predatory' pattern, study shows

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Tobacco companies increased the advertising and lowered the sale price of menthol cigarettes in stores near California high schools with larger populations of African-American students, according to a new study from the Stanford School of Medicine.

Although [cigarette makers](#) have denied using race or [ethnicity](#) to target customers, the lead researcher for the study said the data shows a "predatory" marketing pattern geared to luring young [African Americans](#) into becoming smokers.

"The tobacco companies went out of their way to argue to the Food & Drug Administration that they don't use racial targeting," said Lisa Henriksen, PhD, senior research scientist at the Stanford Prevention Research Center. "This evidence is not consistent with those claims."

Henriksen is the first author of this study, which will be published online June 24 in *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*.

The study comes at a time when the FDA is gathering information on whether to ban menthol as a flavoring agent in cigarettes. A federal law passed in 2008 banned 13 candy flavorings in cigarettes but allowed for the continued use of menthol. Menthol makes the smoke from tobacco smoother and less harsh; even non- [menthol cigarettes](#) often have low levels of the substance.

A draft report by the Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee,

which the FDA asked to investigate the harms from the use and marketing of menthol cigarettes, found that the use of menthol cigarettes is highest among minorities, teenagers and low-income populations. Advertisements often tout the "freshness" of menthol cigarettes, and the report said many smokers mistakenly believe that the addition of menthol makes cigarettes less of a health risk.

The committee's report says that "removal of menthol cigarettes from the marketplace would benefit public health in the United States," but the FDA doesn't have to follow the group's recommendation. The committee is scheduled to meet July 21 in Rockville, Md., to discuss final changes to the document. An FDA spokesman said the edited version of the report will be posted soon on the agency's website, but there is no timeline yet as to when the FDA will make a decision on menthol.

"The committee was charged with considering a broad definition of harm to smokers and other populations, particularly youth," said Henriksen. "We think our study, which shows the predatory marketing in school neighborhoods with higher concentrations of youth and African-American students, fits a broad definition of harm."

In the Stanford study, Henriksen and her colleagues note that the preference for menthol cigarettes among teenage smokers increased from 43.4 percent in 2004 to 48.3 percent in 2008. Menthol cigarettes were also most popular among African-American smokers ages 12-17 (71.9 percent), compared to Hispanics (47 percent) and non-Hispanic whites (41 percent) of the same ages.

To find out how the leading brands of menthol and non-menthol cigarettes were promoted near California high schools, the researchers randomly selected convenience stores, small markets and other tobacco retailers within easy walking distance of 91 schools. The researchers

then rated how the cigarettes were marketed in those stores. The data were collected in 2006.

The researchers found that for every 10-percentage-point increase in the proportion of African-American students at a school, the proportion of advertisements for menthol cigarettes increased by 5.9 percentage points. Additionally, the odds of an advertised discount for Newport, the leading brand of menthol cigarettes, were 1.5 times greater.

When it came to price, the average per-pack price for Newport was \$4.37 at the time of the study, with Marlboro - the leading non-menthol brand - averaging \$3.99. It also found that for every 10-percentage-point increase in the proportion of African-American students at the nearby school, the per-pack price for Newport was 12 cents lower. Advertised discounts and prices for Marlboro, however, were unrelated to school or neighborhood demographics.

"That's important because lower prices tend to lead to increased cigarette use," Henriksen said.

In addition, the study found that for each 10-percentage-point increase in the proportion of neighborhood residents ages 10-17, the proportion of menthol advertisements increased by 11.6 percentage points, and the odds of an advertised discount for Newport was 5.3 times greater.

Although the study was limited to California high schools, the authors believe the findings would be similar throughout the country.

"When kids are exposed to more cigarette advertising they are more likely to start smoking, which will undoubtedly lead to dire health consequences," said senior author Stephen Fortmann, MD, a professor emeritus of medicine at Stanford who is now a senior investigator at Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research in Portland, Ore. "Our

study finds that tobacco companies are trying to make smoking more attractive to teens, when we as a society should be doing just the opposite."

Given previous research that young smokers and African-American [smokers](#) are more sensitive to prices than other groups, Fortmann and Henriksen said they believe this study clearly shows how [tobacco companies](#) are trying to target black teens in marketing menthol cigarettes.

"Adding menthol to cigarettes makes it easier to smoke and harder to quit, so the public health community strongly supports an FDA ban on menthol flavoring," Fortmann said.

Provided by Stanford University Medical Center

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