

Study finds smokers wrongly believe Natural American Spirit cigarettes are healthier

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In the supermarket, foods labeled "organic" carry premium prices. Consumers generally believe that organic food is healthier, and in many cases they're right. But what does it mean when the word "organic" is on a cigarette pack? Is smoking an organic cigarette better for your health?

The short answer is "no," but a new study conducted by Penn Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science (TCORS) researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication found that current and former smokers do erroneously believe that Natural American Spirit (NAS) cigarettes, which the company markets as "organic" and "additive-free," are healthier than other cigarettes.

"Broadly speaking, the purpose of this study was to assess the effects of Natural American Spirit advertising," says Stefanie Gratale, Annenberg doctoral student and lead author of the study. "We found that NAS advertisements lead people to believe that smoking organic [tobacco](#) or a cigarette with fewer additives is a healthier choice."

In fact, there is no established science to corroborate these beliefs. Smoking any type of tobacco can cause lung cancer, emphysema and other diseases; organic and/or additive-free tobacco, the authors point out, is still tobacco. Current scientific research has not shown these [tobacco products](#) to be healthier or less harmful than traditional cigarettes.

So why do people believe that NAS cigarettes are healthier?

The study, "Influence of Natural American Spirit Advertising on Current and Former Smokers' Perceptions and Intentions," recently published in *Tobacco Control*, indicates that the claims made in NAS advertisements lead current and former smokers to believe the company offers a healthier product.

While NAS makes no specific health claims in its advertisements or on its packaging, it uses words like "organic" and "natural" to describe its product. As with food labeled with these words, consumers make

assumptions about the quality and healthiness of a product marketed as "organic" or "all-natural."

Senior author Joseph N. Cappella, Gerald R. Miller Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School, says that "these phrases and words can activate beliefs about the brand that are not specifically discussed in the ads themselves, ultimately misleading consumers."

While other studies have been conducted about the marketing of NAS cigarettes, this study is one of the first with a rigorous experimental design, allowing for evidence that shows a causal connection between NAS advertising and consumer beliefs.

In the study, the researchers presented current and former smokers with a variety of NAS advertisements and then asked them to answer questions about NAS cigarettes. A control group, which saw no advertisements, also answered questions about NAS cigarettes.

The participants who viewed NAS advertisements or claims from them held more erroneous beliefs about the healthiness and composition of NAS cigarettes than did participants who did not view NAS advertisements, regardless of whether the participant identified NAS as his or her preferred brand.

"We hope that this work contributes to the ongoing dialogue about policies that avoid [misleading consumers](#)," Gratale says.

The Penn TCORS researchers are looking to inoculate people against erroneous claims about the healthiness of tobacco products and to correct misperceptions that already exist. They are currently conducting an analysis of public support for possible policy changes in regards to advertising, using the data from this study.

An agreement reached in January between NAS and the FDA requires NAS to cease using the terms "additive-free" and "natural" in its advertising. However, the company can continue using "Natural" in its brand name. In addition, the agreement does not address NAS's use of the term "organic."

If the aim of the agreement is to avoid misinformation about the health risks of NAS cigarettes in the minds of smokers, Gratale believes the new restrictions may not adequately achieve that goal.

"Should tobacco companies be allowed to use words like 'natural' or 'organic' in their advertising?" asks Gratale. "Our study indicates that doing so misleads consumers. Should there be policy in place that regulates advertisement wording to protect consumers?"

More information: Stefanie K Gratale et al, Influence of Natural American Spirit advertising on current and former smokers' perceptions and intentions, *Tobacco Control* (2017). [DOI: 10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2017-053881](https://doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2017-053881)

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