

Cheap herbal cigarettes/bidis widely available online and marketed as 'healthy' option

February 9 2021



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Cheap herbal cigarettes and bidis—a blend of herbs rolled in tendu leaves—are widely available online and often marketed as a safer, healthier alternative to traditional cigarettes, along with various other

unverified 'health' claims, finds research published online in the journal *Tobacco Control*.

While they contain no nicotine or tobacco, they do contain other potentially [harmful substances](#) and may act as a gateway product to conventional tobacco products, say the researchers, who call for the sale and marketing of these products to be regulated as a matter of urgency.

Herbal cigarettes and bidis are widely available in India, Asia, North America, Australia and Europe. Because of their rising popularity among young people around the globe, the researchers wanted to find out how available they are, and how they are marketed.

They used the search engines Google, Yahoo and Bing to find retail [web pages](#) offering herbal smoking products, including cigarettes and bidis. Out of the initial 1044 records retrieved, 73 retail web pages were included in the final analysis.

Most of the web pages hailed from India (29), followed by the U.S. (20). A few were based in the UK (8); New Zealand (4); Israel (3); Australia (2); Canada (1); and China (1).

The web pages revealed 24 brands, produced by 18 manufacturers and offering around 189 different flavours in packs of 5 to 20 sticks.

Nearly two thirds (62%) of the web pages sold herbal cigarettes; 12% sold herbal bidis; and 26% herbal shisha/hookah. Most of these products were sold under the 'healthcare' category.

Forty three web pages (59%) spelled out [health benefits](#) in their product descriptions, of which 41% claimed the benefits were based on complementary medicine; the remainder were manufacturers' own claims.

Claims included use as a smoking cessation aid (40%); a stress reliever (19%); and to ease respiratory symptoms, including COVID-19 (15%).

Other claims included use as a mood enhancer; a treatment for jet lag; a concentration or energy booster; and a digestive aid.

Only 16% of the web pages clarified that the claims 'have not been evaluated by the FDA [US Food and Drug Administration]' or any other regulatory authority.

Fewer than 3% cautioned: 'Any type of smoking is injurious to health'. And none of the retail web pages listed the possible harms associated with smoking these products.

Two thirds (67%) of the included retail web pages didn't require any proof of age before purchase; and only around 1 in 5 (22%) stated 'not to be sold to minors'.

The average customer rating was 3.61 out of a maximum of 5, say the researchers. The pack price for 20 sticks ranged from 51 to 1830 Indian Rupees, equivalent to US\$0.70 to US\$25, or £0.51 to £18.50.

The researchers acknowledge that search engine optimisation will vary from country to country, so their findings might not be applicable elsewhere, added to which the study was restricted to web pages in the English language only. E-commerce wholesalers selling products in bulk weren't included either.

Nevertheless, they suggest: "The present study has reported the vast availability of [herbal smoking products] in various flavours and at affordable prices in the e-retail market. These smoking products are being sold without any age restriction/verification on the pretext of being nicotine free and a safer alternative to tobacco smoking."

And although touted as a healthy alternative to conventional cigarettes, they still contain potentially harmful chemicals, while the exhaled carbon monoxide may affect people nearby, they add.

"Various studies have concluded that herbal cigarettes do not deliver any fewer carcinogens than regular cigarettes, and the manufacturers should avoid misleading the public when promoting herbal cigarettes as safer products," they continue.

While public health policy and legislation have rightly focused on tobacco and nicotine addiction, herbal products have been overlooked, point out the researchers.

"This highlights the urgent need to focus on all kinds of [smoking](#) products, including tobacco-free products, prioritising public health and creating a smoke-free world in the real sense," they conclude.

More information: Herbal smoking products: a systematic content analysis and mapping of the e-retail market, *Tobacco Control* (2021). tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/lookup/...ocontrol-2020-056340

Provided by British Medical Journal

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