

As menthol ban nears, big tobacco is adding synthetic version to cigarettes instead

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Cigarette makers are using synthetic menthol substitutes in what appears

to be an effort to skirt a looming federal menthol ban, researchers say.

The [menthol](#) flavor appeals to younger and newer smokers, according to investigators at Duke Health in Durham, N.C., and Yale University in New Haven, Conn.

These new "non-menthol" cigarettes are being introduced in states that have already banned actual menthol in advance of a U.S. Food and Drug Administration ban later this year.

In [studying these "non-menthol" products](#), researchers identified new compounds that achieve cooling sensations similar to menthol. The study findings were published online Oct. 9 in a research letter in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*.

"We found that [tobacco companies](#) are adding a synthetic cooling agent called WS-3 to these new 'non-menthol' cigarettes," said senior author Sven-Eric Jordt, an associate professor at Duke University School of Medicine.

"The added amounts are sufficient to produce robust cooling sensations, with some brands having more cooling activity than their menthol equivalent cigarettes," he said in a university news release

California and Massachusetts have already banned menthol cigarettes.

After California's December 2022 ban, RJ Reynolds and ITG introduced non-menthol cigarettes with packaging and [marketing strategies](#) similar to those of menthol products.

Lead author Sairam Jabba, a senior research scientist at Duke, measured whether cigarettes purchased in the two states with bans contained chemicals that activate the cold/menthol receptor.

"We found that four of the non-menthol cigarette products, all manufactured by RJ Reynolds, robustly activated the cold/menthol receptor, and this cooling activity was stronger than of their menthol counterparts," Jabba said.

"These results signify that these new 'non-menthol' cigarettes can produce the same cooling sensations as menthol cigarettes and thereby facilitate smoking initiation," he said. "Allowing these cigarettes to be marketed would nullify several of the expected public health benefits from state and federal bans of menthol cigarettes."

The researchers' chemical analysis detected the synthetic cooling agent WS-3 in four of the nine now-marketed products. Although the products lack menthol's minty smell, they do produce the cooling effect. The investigators also noted vanilla and tropical flavor chemicals in these cigarettes.

"Our discovery of restricted flavors such as vanilla, which have characteristic odor and taste, demonstrates that big tobacco is ignoring current federal regulations banning the addition of characteristic flavors to cigarettes," Jordt said. "More importantly, vanilla flavor is very popular among children and youth, making it easy for them to initiate on these cigarettes."

Historically, menthol cigarettes have also been aggressively marketed toward Black people. Up to 90% of Black smokers use [menthol cigarettes](#).

"FDA regulators need to develop effective strategies for the control of odorless cooling agents and flavors that threaten to bypass tobacco flavor bans," Jordt said.

More information: Sairam V. Jabba et al, Synthetic Cooling Agent

and Other Flavor Additives in "Non-Menthol" Cigarettes Marketed in California and Massachusetts After Menthol Cigarette Bans, *JAMA* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2023.17134](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2023.17134)

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