

## **Ban Menthol Cigarettes to Promote Youth Health and Academic Achievement**

The increasing use of Menthol cigarettes by youth and young adolescents is a matter of serious concern because of its serious health effects and impacts on students' academic achievements. Every society has a duty to protect her young ones if it expects to have healthier, resilient, and productive future generations. Tobacco-use and initiation behaviors among children of school age are being deliberately pushed by tobacco industry manufacturers and marketers to lure unsuspecting young children into accepting cigarette smoking as a socially acceptable norm. Tobacco/menthol cigarette-use are deceptively promoted to kids as being “cool and a symbol of growing up”, whereas it is a gateway to poor health, addiction, and misery. According to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cigarette smoking is among one of the six leading categories of priority health risk behaviors associated resulting in morbidity and mortality among youth and adults in our society.

While cigarette use has declined over the years, the use of flavored tobacco has been on the increase. On August 28, 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law Senate Bill 793, prohibiting the sale of most flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes. However, the actions of the tobacco industry and interest groups have delayed the statewide implementation of the Bill until a statewide vote in 2022. Sales of Menthol cigarettes continue to swell the tobacco market as they are widely available at almost all corner/grocery stores in all ethnic and racial neighborhoods. The National Youth Tobacco Survey reported that 82.1 percent of students in grades 6 through 12 were exposed to tobacco product marketing over the internet, in newspapers or magazines, at the point of sale, or on TV or in movies in 2018. The U.S. Surgeon General has concluded that youth use of nicotine in any form like menthol cigarettes, e-

cigarettes, is unsafe. Nicotine is highly addictive and harms young teen's brain development, particularly the parts of the brain responsible for attention, memory and learning. It appears likely that tobacco companies intentionally have young teens and adolescents as the target for their misleading or deceitful advertisements that mentholated cigarettes are less harmful and less addictive than non-menthol cigarettes. Tobacco commercials or marketers make their advertisements for menthols using images of youthfulness and fun, and have featured younger looking models than those used in advertisements for non-menthol cigarette. Tactfully, mentholated cigarettes are packaged and marketed in green packs with deceitful messages that menthol cigarettes are "kool", have "fine taste" and giving pleasant experience. This has made mentholated cigarettes more appealing and attractive to new smokers. It has been shown by studies that African American neighborhoods are targeted in the sell and distribution of mentholated cigarettes. So allowing tobacco industries and marketers to continue to promote mentholated cigarette sell in African American neighborhoods is an injustice that reduces the lifespan and health and wellbeing of Black people and other young people and adults who will be impacted. Mentholated cigarettes increase the tobacco industries' profit margins. In 2019, it contributed to 37% of the tobacco market according data from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The increase is the highest proportion on record since FTC began collecting this data in 1963.

Even though cigarette smoking has been on the decline for years in the United States, smoking mentholated cigarettes have been on the rise. The use of menthol in cigarettes is primarily intended to initiate smoking in young people earlier and hook them to nicotine use thereby making it harder for them to quit. This may explain why more and more young teens are attracted to mentholated or flavored cigarettes. Experts found that Big Tobacco companies

genetically engineered their tobacco crops to contain two times the amount of nicotine. Nicotine in tobacco is a poison and dangerous to health. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends banning of menthol and other flavors in cigarettes because flavors are introduced in cigarettes to promote addiction and promote use. Tobacco manufacturers clearly understand youth teens' tastes and desires in time. As children grow and out of their youth curiosity, they like to experiment with almost everything. Children grow in innocence, are open minded, excited about things around them, and ignorant of life or the unpleasant aspects of life. As a result, it is the duty of the adults in the society to teach and nurture the youth in order to protect them from the hands of the tobacco industry manufacturers and sellers. It has been well established by research that the chemicals in tobacco are harmful to the development and health of children because of the immaturity of their brains. The brains of young children keep developing until age 25, so the inhalation of nicotine in tobacco into the body impacts brain development and lead to diseases in a lifetime. Any damage or change to brain function may be permanent or irreversible. Additionally, nicotine has other adverse health impacts such as slowing down attention span, memory, and learning capabilities. It also impairs young adolescents' decision-making skills, reduces impulse control, and worsens mood, anxiety, and causes depression. Inhaling mentholated tobacco infuses nicotine to the lungs. Human lungs do not like vapor or smoke and do not respond well to it as it impairs airways and lung immune activities. Also, nicotine increases the risks of lung inflammation and bronchitis in youth. It is evident from scientific studies that most youth who started smoking would not do so if flavors or mentholated tobacco did not exist.

In view of the dangers of youth smoking, it becomes the responsibility of all well-meaning citizens to stop the tobacco industry from poisoning young children and to ensure that

young children educated to resist smoking. As children have easy access to social media, they are easily exposed to the lies and tricks of the tobacco industry and hence there is a great need for public awareness and intervention to stop poisoning of our children. The more young children and teens are exposed to smoking, the higher the nicotine impacts and the lower their academic achievements. Our young children should not be allowed to experiment with nicotine poison in mentholated cigarettes at all.

My opinion is that mentholated cigarettes and all forms of flavored tobacco be permanently banned/ or temporarily restricted in all at-high-risk cities. With an average of 45,000 African Americans dying from tobacco related diseases and disabilities annually, and 90% of all African smokers using mentholated cigarettes, it becomes reasonable that stricter regulations on all tobacco products be implemented in cities and zip codes where such cases are more. Again, there should be tobacco-use awareness and education in such cities and zip codes in order promote better lifestyle choices. In such cities and zip codes, there should be no selling of such products online, by mails or retail to avoid making them accessible to young children. Along the same line, tobacco-use education should be taught explicitly to school children from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade to create an awareness of the health problems of nicotine use. Such educational and health awareness will teach young children the skills they need to resist peer pressures into tobacco use or tobacco initiation. Equally, it will delegitimize smoking or tobacco-use as an acceptable form of social behavior or norm.

In summary, this article makes clear the following:

- That the tobacco industries and marketers deliberately target young children and adults from poor socio-economic communities, specifically the African Americans and Hispanics.
- Mentholated cigarettes with high nicotine contents are produced, branded, and targeted to hook and lure young smokers into nicotine addiction.
- All parents, educators, the public should be aware of the war declared on our youth by the tobacco industry and be ready to resist any policies that promote sell of tobacco products to young children in their neighborhoods. Equally, citizens should resist politicians in their communities who side with the big tobacco businesses to allow mentholated cigarettes and other tobacco to be marketed freely in our neighborhoods.
- Health education should be taught in all schools and tobacco education campaign mounted in the communities to create more awareness of the health consequences of tobacco-use. Current partnership between the Breathe® California and Health for Schools and Communities Foundation to promote tobacco-use education and intervention in African American communities in the Bay Area is highly commendable and a step in the right direction.
- To prevent young kids' access to mentholated cigarettes and other forms of tobacco use, it is recommended that menthol be banned to prevent the sell to kids and young children as well as prevent early initiation, lifelong addiction, and prolonged ill-health from tobacco-use. Banning mentholated tobacco is banning tobacco industry from destroying our children, the future of our country.

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