Smokers swallow menthol cigarettes as less harmful, but Cancer Council warns it’s a smokescreen

Smokers incorrectly believe menthol cigarettes are less damaging than non-menthol cigarettes, according to Cancer Council Victoria research published today in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health and funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Of the sample of 999 Australian 18–69-year-old weekly smokers recruited for the study, three-quarters had at least some experience of smoking menthol cigarettes and a quarter currently smoked menthol cigarettes at least once a week.

Professor Melanie Wakefield, Head of the Behavioural Science Division at Cancer Council Victoria, said the findings were particularly concerning as menthol cigarettes can make it easier for young people to become addicted to cigarette smoking, and can make it harder for current smokers to quit.

“We found that current menthol smokers were up to nine times more likely to report that menthol rather than non-menthol cigarettes create favourable sensory experiences when they are smoked, including feeling smooth, being soothing on the throat, having a fresh taste and feeling clean. Menthol smokers incorrectly believed cigarettes with these favourable sensations are less damaging than cigarettes with more unpleasant sensory experiences.

“This is worrying; although young people have been raised with the knowledge that smoking is bad for them, anything that makes smoking seem less harmful to a young demographic, and that makes it harder for current smokers to quit, is cause for concern.”

Todd Harper, CEO of Cancer Council Victoria, said the tobacco industry has a long history of misleading smokers into believing that some tobacco products, such as menthol cigarettes, are a safer and healthier option.

“Over the years, Big Tobacco has spent a lot of time, money and effort perpetuating this myth, but we want to be clear: there are no safe cigarettes.”

Mr Harper said the removal of menthol from all tobacco products in Australia would eliminate the source of the positive sensory experiences that smokers can interpret as meaning that some cigarettes are less harmful than others.

“Menthol is no longer allowed in tobacco products sold in Canada, the United Kingdom and the European Union. Evidence from these countries has shown that when menthol cigarettes are no longer available, former menthol smokers find it easier to quit.”

In the United States, the Biden administration also recently announced plans to end the sale of menthol-flavoured cigarettes and cigars.

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About Cancer Council Victoria

Cancer Council Victoria is a non-profit cancer organisation dedicated to world-leading cancer research, prevention, and support since our establishment in 1936. Our mission is to prevent cancer, empower patients and save lives.

Cancer never rests, and for that reason, neither do we. That’s why we’re here for everyone affected by cancer every minute, every hour, every day.

Find out more at [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)