



Flavored Tobacco Products and Youth

Background

Flavors are used to reduce the harshness of tobacco and increase the appeal of tobacco products. A survey from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) found almost 80% of youth (age 12-17) who used tobacco products in 2014 started with a flavored product.¹ Flavored e-cigarettes and menthol cigarettes are also associated with:



Increased initiation^{2,3,4}



Increased use^{3,4}



Intention to continue use²



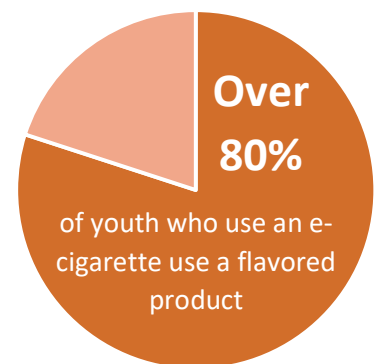
False perception that flavored tobacco products are safer than non-flavored tobacco products²

Menthol Cigarettes and Mentholated Tobacco Products

Menthol is a chemical compound that is used as an additive in cigarettes and other tobacco products. It creates a cooling effect which reduces the harshness of cigarette smoke and suppresses coughing.¹ According to the FDA, “research suggests flavors may also make these products more enticing to youth and young adults.”⁵ In addition, tobacco companies target marginalized individuals (e.g., youth, those with mental health conditions,⁶ LGBTQIA+ persons⁷) and communities (African American and those with low income⁴). According to the FDA, “85.8 percent of African American smokers, 46 percent of Hispanic smokers, 39 percent of Asian smokers, and 28.7 percent of White smokers smoke menthol cigarettes”.¹

Flavored E-Cigarettes

The use of e-cigarettes and other electronic nicotine devices has come under scrutiny as youth use of these products has been described as an epidemic.⁸ In 2020, 19.6% of high school students (3.02 million) and 4.7% of middle school students (550,000) reported having used an e-cigarette in the past 30 days across the United States. Among these youth e-cigarette users, 82.9% used flavored e-cigarettes, including 84.7% of high school users (2.53 million) and 73.9% of middle school users (400,000). Among high school students who currently used any type of flavored e-cigarettes in the past 30 days, the most commonly used flavor types were fruit (73.1%; 1.83 million); mint (55.8%; 1.39 million); menthol (37.0%; 920,000); and candy, desserts, or other sweets (36.4%; 910,000).^{9,10} Flavors are reported as a key reason for e-cigarette use among youth and all other tobacco products.²



¹ U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2020). [Menthol and Other Flavors in Tobacco Products](#).

² Li-Ling Huang et al., Impact of non-menthol flavours in tobacco products on perceptions and use among youth, young adults and adults: a systematic review, 26 TOB. CONTROL 709–719 (2017)

³ Villanti, Andrea C, Collins, Lauren K, Niaura, Raymond S, Gagosian, Stacey Y, & Abrams, David B. (2017). Menthol cigarettes and the public health standard: a systematic review. BMC public health, 17(1), 983.

⁴ Giovino, Gary A, Villanti, Andrea C, Mowery, Paul D, Sevilimedu, Varadan, Niaura, Raymond S, Vallone, Donna M, & Abrams, David B. (2015). Differential trends in cigarette smoking in the USA: is menthol slowing progress? Tobacco control, 24(1), 28–37. Research Support, Non-U.S. Gov't, England: BMJ.

⁵ U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2020). [Menthol and Other Flavors in Tobacco Products](#).

⁶ Brunette, Mary F, Ferron, Joelle C, Geiger, Pamela, & Villanti, Andrea C. (2019). Menthol cigarette use in young adult smokers with severe mental illnesses. Nicotine & tobacco research, 21(5), 691–694.

⁷ Fallin, Amanda, Goodin, Amie, and King, Brian A. (2016). "Menthol Cigarette Smoking among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adults." American Journal of Preventive Medicine, vol. 48, no. 1, Elsevier Inc, 2015, pp. 93-97, doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2014.07.044.

⁸ FDA. 2018. [Statement from FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, M.D., on new steps to address epidemic of youth e-cigarette use](#).

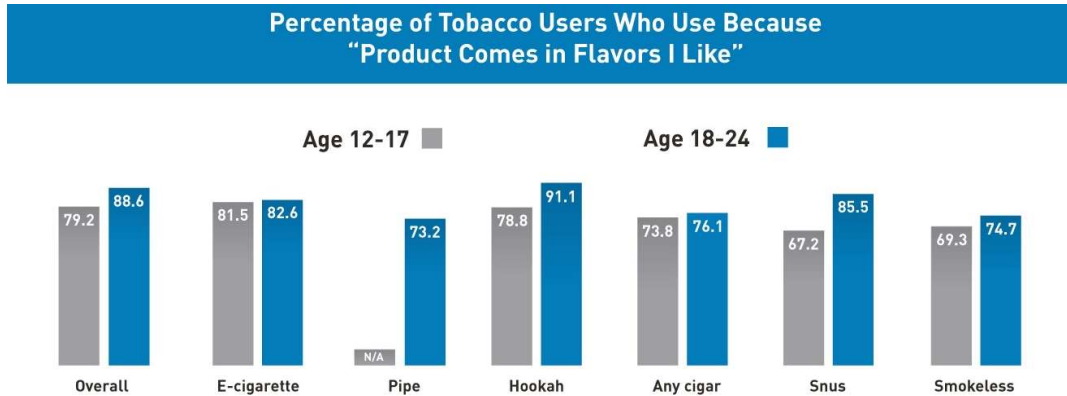
⁹ CDC and FDA analyzed nationally representative data from the 2020 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS), a cross-sectional, school-based, self-administered survey of U.S. middle school (grades 6–8) and high school (grades 9–12) students conducted during January 16– March 16, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/surveys/nyts/index.htm

¹⁰ Harrell et al., Flavored E-Cigarette Use: Characterizing Youth, Young Adult, and Adult Users, 5 Prev. Med. Rep. 33 (2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5121224>.



Cigars, Hookah, and Other Tobacco Products

There are a number of other tobacco products besides menthol cigarettes and flavored e-cigarettes which have limited flavor regulation. As the graph below shows, flavor is a key reason youth use cigars, hookah, and smokeless tobacco (including snus). It is important to consider all tobacco products in policy, in part because youth sometimes switch from one to another product.



Participants were asked to check all reasons for using tobacco and some have selected multiple reasons.

Current Flavor Policies

Due to accumulated evidence that flavors in combustible tobacco products attract youth smokers, in April 2021 the FDA announced its intention to ban menthol cigarettes and all flavored cigars. Until the FDA finalizes its ruling, though, there is no federal regulation of menthol in cigarettes, as the flavor was excluded from the 2009 Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act’s (the Tobacco Act) ban on the use of characterizing flavors in cigarettes.¹⁷ 'Characterizing flavor' is the 'obvious flavor' or what the product is labeled as. Many tobacco products use menthol as an additive but are not labeled as menthol products since it is not the 'obvious flavor'. At this time there are no plans to ban menthol as an additive so it and other flavors will still be in tobacco products." Since enactment of the Tobacco Act, the FDA has asserted its regulatory authority over e-cigarettes and, in January 2020, issued a ban on certain flavors of pod (cartridge)-based systems such as JUUL. In this new policy, the FDA again excluded menthol and tobacco flavors and imposed no flavor restrictions on e-liquids or disposable e-cigarette devices such as Puff Bar.¹¹

In Michigan, Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued emergency rules in 2019 that would have banned flavored all e-cigarette products, including those containing menthol.¹² These rules made Michigan the first state to propose such a ban, but they were rejected in a court challenge and not implemented.¹³ The Governor has proposed a modified version of the rules, but they have not been adopted. Given the evidence that flavored products attract youth to start using e-cigarettes and (menthol) cigarettes, it remains imperative that policies are implemented to reduce youth access to flavored products.

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¹¹ American Heart Association. (2020) [Fact Sheet: Tobacco Flavoring](#).
¹² Oosting, J. and LeBlanc B. (2019). [Whitmer makes Michigan first state to ban flavored e-cigarettes](#).
¹³ Neavling, S. (2020). [Michigan prepares to ban flavored nicotine vaping – again – without legislative approval](#).
Image: U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2020). [PATH Study Findings Give Insight into Flavored Tobacco, Health Effects of E-Cigarettes, and Adult Use of Cigars and Hookah](#).