Use of Menthol Cigarettes in Maryland: 2006

Smoking is the leading preventable cause of disease and death. In 2006, Maryland conducted two surveys of tobacco use behaviors and attitudes – one of middle and high school students and another of adults. The surveys were funded by Maryland’s Cigarette Restitution Fund Program, which oversees the use of funds awarded to Maryland as a result of the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between states and the tobacco industry. These surveys revealed that use of particular kinds of tobacco is higher in some racial/ethnic groups than in others.

Health Risks:
• Smokers of menthol cigarettes have been found to have higher cotinine (metabolite of nicotine) and carbon monoxide levels. Both carbon monoxide and nicotine are causally related to the development or triggering of cardiovascular events.
• Menthol may mask symptoms of respiratory disease, potentially leading to delays in seeking medical attention and suppressing motivation to quit.
• Menthol desensitizes the tongue to nicotine, which can produce a burning, painful sensation.

Marketing and sale of menthol cigarettes has long been a national public health concern because:
• Smoking menthol cigarettes may make quitting more difficult, and people who smoke menthol cigarettes show greater signs of addiction than those who smoke regular cigarettes.
• Tobacco companies have controlled menthol levels as a way of increasing sales.
• Some studies have found that menthol cigarette ex-smokers have a higher risk of relapse.
• The consumption of menthol cigarettes is high among African Americans, and is increasing among adolescents and young adults, women and Asian and Pacific Islander Americans.

Among Maryland youth younger than 18 years old:
• About eight percent (7.9%) reported that they usually smoked menthol cigarettes.
• Among current smokers, more than half (59.8%) usually smoked menthol cigarettes, ranging from 51.6% of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders to 66.3% of American Indians.
• Among current smokers, females were more likely (64.5%) than males (55.7%) to smoke menthol cigarettes.

Among Maryland adults 18 and older:
• More than six percent (6.4%) of Maryland adults reported that they smoked menthol cigarettes.
• Close to half (47.1%) of current adult smokers in Maryland reported that they smoked menthol cigarettes.
• Black smokers had the highest rates (82.4%) of menthol cigarette use; Whites had the lowest (30.7%).
• Current adult smokers (with the exception of Black smokers) with lower incomes per year (less than $50,000) were more likely to use menthol cigarettes than those with higher incomes ($50,000 or more).
• Among Black current smokers, there was little variation by income—eight out of ten Black smokers used menthol cigarettes, regardless of income level.

Maryland findings are consistent with national statistics, which show high rates of menthol cigarette use in both youth and adults, with especially high rates for African American adult smokers. More than half of currently smoking youth in all ethnic groups report menthol cigarette use. State legislation, regulations, tobacco prevention and cessation programs, as well as research scientists should address specific psychological, social, and cultural determinants that influence each racial/ethnic group use of and dependence on menthol cigarettes.

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