

Flavors in Tobacco Products

Attracting & Addicting Youth

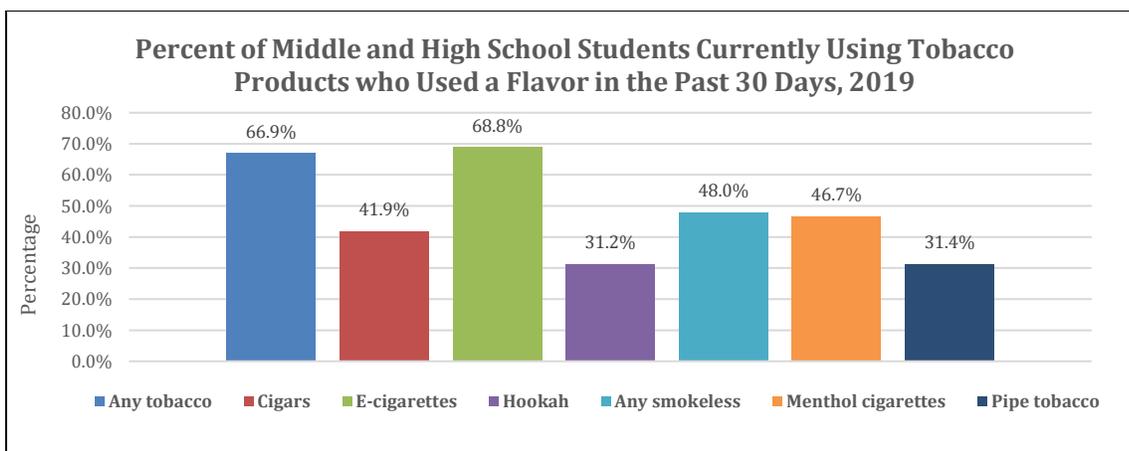


Flavors are a marketing weapon the tobacco manufacturers use to target youth and young people to a lifetime of addiction. Altering tobacco product ingredients and design, like adding flavors, can improve the ease of use of a product by masking harsh effects, facilitating nicotine uptake, and increasing a product's overall appeal.ⁱ Candy, fruit, mint and menthol flavorings in tobacco products are a promotional tool to lure new, young users, and are aggressively marketed with creative campaigns by tobacco companies.ⁱⁱ Products with flavors like cherry, grape, cotton candy, and gummy bear are clearly not aimed at established, adult tobacco users and years of tobacco industry documents confirm the intended use of flavors to target youth.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, youth report flavors as a leading reason why they use tobacco products and perceive flavored products as less harmful.^{iv,v}

The use of any flavored tobacco product among youth is concerning because it exposes them to a lifetime of nicotine addiction, disease, and premature death.

Flavored Tobacco Products

Overall use of tobacco products by youth has soared to 23 percent of middle and high schoolers, driven by a substantial increase in e-cigarette use.^{vi} Furthermore, the use of flavored tobacco products by youth and young adults is high. In 2019, an estimated 4.3 million middle and high school students used a flavored product in the last 30 days, or approximately 70 percent of students who used tobacco used a flavored product. Another study found that more than 80 percent of teens who had ever used a tobacco product started with a flavored product.^{vii} Characterizing flavors, except for menthol and tobacco, are prohibited in cigarettes by federal law, but other tobacco products have benefited from not being covered by a similar regulatory restriction (see Spotlight on p.3).



Flavored e-cigarettes have proliferated on the market, with one study identifying more than 15,500 distinct flavors available to consumers, up from 7,700 unique e-cigarette flavors in 2014.^{viii} Flavors offered including fruit, candy, and menthol flavors, and were often paired with flashy marketing campaigns to appeal to youth. E-cigarettes are the most commonly used flavored tobacco product among high school students overall.

Data from the 2016-2017 PATH study, the largest national longitudinal study looking at tobacco use and its

effects, found that among teens who use e-cigarettes, 97.0 percent regularly used a flavored product.^{ix} Also, among those teens who had ever tried an e-cigarette, 96.1 percent used a flavor product for the first time. In 2019, 71.7 percent of high school students who currently use an e-cigarette use a flavored product, and the percentage is 59.9 percent for middle school students. Among exclusive users of e-cigarettes, use of mint or menthol flavored e-cigarettes went up from 16.0 percent in 2016 to 57.3 percent in 2019, while candy-, dessert- and other sweet-flavors decreased.^x Among young adults who reported using e-cigarettes every or some days in 2013-2014, 91.6 percent used a flavored product.^{xi}

So-called “little cigars” have the look and feel of a cigarette, and are smoked like a cigarette, yet are often sold individually and are available in a variety of flavors and have likely benefited the most from the cigarette flavor prohibition. In fact, in 2016, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) sent warning letters to four tobacco manufacturers stating that they were illegally selling flavored cigarettes labeled as “little cigars.”^{xii} Large cigars and cigarillos, which can resemble either “little cigars” or large cigars, can come in a variety of flavors. Cigars were the most popular product among black high school students.^{xiii} Among all teen cigar users, more than 41.9 percent had smoked a flavored cigar in the past 30 days in 2019.^{xiv} According to another study, in 2014, more than 70 percent of teens who have ever smoked a cigar smoked a flavored product.^{xv}

Smokeless tobacco companies have a long history of using flavorings, such as mint, cherry, apple, and honey, and other product manipulation to gradually get new, young users addicted to “starter” products, keep them using, and shift them on to more potent smokeless tobacco products. In 2019, 48.0 percent of middle and high school students who used smokeless tobacco had used a flavored product in the last month.^{xvi} According to another study, in 2014, more than 70 percent of teens who had ever used smokeless tobacco used a flavored product the first time.^{xvii}

For waterpipe or hookah use, more than 31.2 percent of current middle and high school users used a

SPOTLIGHT: Federal regulation of flavors in tobacco products

Recognizing the danger that flavors in cigarettes has in attracting and addicting new smokers, especially youth, the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (TCA) of 2009 prohibited the use of characterizing flavors, except for menthol and tobacco, in cigarettes. Prior to the law, cigarette manufacturers aggressively marketed these flavored products, including “Twista Lime” and “Winter MochaMint,” with creative campaigns like “scratch and sniff” marketing tactics, DJ nights, ads in magazines with a high proportion of youth and young adult readers, and specially-themed packs to attract new young users.

To understand a consequence to limiting the flavor prohibition to only cigarettes and exempting menthol flavoring, an analysis evaluated youth tobacco use before and after the prohibition.^{xxvi} The analysis found a decrease in the likelihood of being a smoker (17.1 percent) and fewer cigarettes smoked (59 percent) associated with the flavor prohibition, but also a 45 percent increase in the probability that the youth smoker used menthol cigarettes. Furthermore, the flavor prohibition was associated with increases in both cigar use (34.4 percent) and pipe use (54.6 percent). This suggests that youth smokers, in the absence of flavored cigarettes, are substituting with menthol cigarettes or cigars and pipe tobacco, for which the flavor prohibition does not apply.

flavored product in 2019.^{xviii} Additionally, 90 percent of those surveyed who had ever smoked hookah used a flavored product the first time in 2014.^{xix} What's troubling, is that the flavorings used in waterpipe tobacco, the sweet aromas and use of water make users misperceive this practice as safer than cigarette smoking.^{xx} In fact, hookah tobacco and smoke are as dangerous as cigarettes, and contain carcinogens and other substances that can cause cancer and other diseases.^{xxi} An hour-long waterpipe or hookah session typically involves 200 puffs of smoke, whereas smoking a single cigarette typically involves 20 puffs of smoke.

Menthol

Long before cigarette companies started adding fruit, candy, and alcohol flavorings to cigarettes, they were manipulating levels of menthol to addict new, young smokers. Menthol acts to mask the harsh taste of tobacco with a minty flavor and by reducing irritation at the back of the throat with a cooling sensation. Additionally, menthol may enhance the delivery of nicotine. Knowing that youth who experience less negative physiological effects of smoking are more likely to continue smoking regularly, the tobacco industry has spent decades manipulating its menthol brand-specific product line to appeal to youth and, in particular, African Americans. The FDA's preliminary scientific investigation on menthol cigarettes concluded that menthol cigarette smoking increases initiation and progression to smoking, increases dependency, and reduces cessation success, particularly among African American smokers.^{xxii}

Adding insult to injury, tobacco manufacturers have aggressively targeted certain communities with their menthol products, leading to an unequal burden of death and disease. The overwhelming majority of all African-American smokers (85.5 percent) report smoking menthol cigarettes compared to less than a third of white smokers (28.7 percent).^{xxiii} Almost half of youth who smoked cigarettes used menthol cigarettes (46.7 percent).^{xxiv} Internal tobacco industry documents show that the tobacco companies were intentionally targeting African-Americans and other minorities through advertising in magazines with high readership by these populations, including youth, and by targeting specific neighborhoods with higher Hispanic and African-American populations with more advertising and promotions.^{xxv}

ACS CAN's Position:

The aggressive use of flavors and marketing tactics by the tobacco industry, rapid increased use of flavored products by youth and young adults, and under regulation of these products requires the public health community to take action to protect youth and young adults, and the public health at-large. ACS CAN supports several strategies:

- ❖ **Federal Restrictions:** Congress or the FDA should prohibit the use of flavors, including menthol, in all tobacco products. A manufacturer should be required, through premarket review, to prove that the use of a flavor is appropriate for the protection of public health.
- ❖ **State and Local Sales Restrictions:** Many states and localities are moving forward and enacting restrictions on the sale of flavored tobacco products and winning legal challenges to its laws. The TCA does not permit a state or locality from requiring a product standard, such as the removal of a flavor, but the law does preserve the ability for states and localities to regulate the sales of tobacco products. States and localities should pursue policy options including restrictions or a complete prohibition of the sale of flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes, while taking into consideration what is permitted in a specific jurisdiction.

¹ FDA Guidance for Industry and FDA Staff, "General Questions and Answers on the Ban of Cigarettes that Contain Certain Characterizing Flavors (Edition 2)" ("FDA Guidance on Characterizing Flavors").

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