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Tobacco Free NYS urges public to take action against unjust marketing and promotion of menthol cigarettes

New statewide “It’s Not Just” campaign aimed at hard-hitting menthol-flavored tobacco product marketing targeting Black communities

ALBANY, N.Y. – A new statewide initiative aims to put a spotlight on how the tobacco industry has specifically targeted African American communities for decades with its aggressive marketing of menthol-flavored tobacco products.^{1,2} The regional and statewide “It’s Not Just” campaign is focused on ending the misconception that menthol is just a flavor. It’s not just an injustice, it’s killing Black Americans.

Smoking-related illnesses are the No. 1 cause of death in the African American community, surpassing all other causes of death, including AIDS, homicide, diabetes and accidents.^{3,4,5} Overall, 85% of African American smokers use menthol cigarettes, compared to 29% of white smokers.^{3,6}

The “It’s Not Just” campaign is intended to educate people across New York State about the injustice of menthol-flavored tobacco product marketing and promotion. The campaign uses direct language and powerful, emotional imagery of people who represent communities targeted by Big Tobacco. It describes how menthol is more than a flavor, highlighting hard-hitting facts about the manipulative, aggressive nature of menthol tobacco marketing and its impact on African American communities.

“With the recent FDA announcement to ban menthol-flavored tobacco products, this campaign couldn’t be more timely and relevant,” said LaTroya Hester, director of communications, The Center for Black Health & Equity. “We know that the tobacco industry will fight this decision with the full force of its legal and marketing power, but we’re not intimidated. The Center is excited about the launch of this campaign, and we are so honored to contribute to much-needed counter-messaging.”

Individuals can learn more about how to help fight the injustice of menthol-flavored tobacco products at the new campaign’s website: NotJustMenthol.org.

While the tobacco industry has traditionally targeted Black communities with the marketing of menthol products, menthol is also a driver of youth initiation.^{7,8} When New York State ended the sale of flavored e-cigarettes statewide in May 2020, it was a significant step toward reducing youth tobacco use. However, other flavored tobacco products, such as menthol cigarettes, continue to present an obstacle to decreasing tobacco use among young people and underserved populations.

Additional statistics:

- Menthol marketing
 - Menthol use among Black communities is a direct result of the tobacco industry's marketing practices and product manipulation.^{7,9}
 - Historically, the marketing and promotion of menthol cigarettes have been targeted heavily toward African Americans through culturally tailored advertising and messages.^{1,2,10}
 - Menthol products are given more shelf space in retail outlets within African American and other minority neighborhoods.^{1,11}
 - In addition to being heavily advertised and widely available, certain tobacco products have been found to be priced lower in African American communities, making them more appealing, particularly to price-sensitive youth.^{12,13,14}
- Menthol usage
 - Ninety-three percent of Black smokers started by using menthol cigarettes.^{15,16}
 - Over 7 out of 10 African American youth ages 12-17 years who smoke use menthol cigarettes.^{1,17}
 - Research indicates that menthol makes smoking easier to start and harder to quit.^{18,19}
 - Tobacco companies add menthol to make cigarettes seem less harsh and more appealing to new smokers and young people.¹⁵
 - Tobacco companies market menthol cigarettes as “smoother” than other cigarettes.^{2,15}
 - Menthol in cigarettes creates a cooling sensation in the throat and airways when the user inhales.^{2,9,15}
- Health impact
 - Menthol cigarettes are not less harmful than other cigarettes and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has found that they are likely a greater risk to public health than non-menthol cigarettes.^{2,15}
 - Black smokers smoke less but die of heart attacks, strokes and other causes linked to tobacco use at higher rates than white smokers.^{1,20-24}

Support available for New Yorkers who want to quit

For help quitting smoking or vaping, including free nicotine replacement therapy for eligible residents, individuals can contact a health care provider, and call the New York State Smokers' Quitline at 1-866-NY-QUITS or visit: nysmokefree.com. Effective medications and counseling are covered by Medicaid and most insurance programs.

Tobacco Free New York State and Reality Check student groups around the state have worked tirelessly to educate local communities on the tobacco industry's use of menthol and other flavored tobacco products as a tool to target, attract and addict new smokers. Tobacco Free New York State, including the Reality Check student youth groups, is part of the NYS Tobacco Control Program.

About Tobacco Free NYS

The New York State Tobacco Control Program funds 21 community organizations across the state to work toward Advancing Tobacco-Free Communities. We educate community leaders and the public about the dangers and social injustice of tobacco marketing and engage local stakeholders to promote community changes that limit the tobacco industry's presence, de-normalize tobacco use and eliminate secondhand smoke. Find out more at tobaccofreenys.org.

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