

Black/African American Communities and Tobacco



The facts

Tobacco is the leading preventable cause of death in the US. Just like in other communities, among Black populations, smoking causes more deaths than alcohol, car accidents, suicide, AIDS, murder, and illegal drugs... combined!

To be specific, smoking increases the risk of getting cancer, having a heart attack or stroke, and developing diabetes, the four leading health-related causes of death in the African American community.¹ Smoking is making a bad situation even worse.



Know the facts that can help save your life or the life of someone you love.

Why is this happening?

The tobacco industry has targeted the Black community for many years:

- Historically, the tobacco companies reached out specifically to Black social organizations, schools, and political groups as a sneaky way to market their products and get more customers.
- They created ads that show Black people as attractive, happy, wealthy, and independent because they smoke, making other Black people want to smoke.^{2,3}
- Big Tobacco used to heavily advertise in magazines popular with the Black community, and now they're finding ways to advertise on social media and in stores where you can buy their products.³
- They spend more on tobacco advertising in areas with large African American/Black populations compared to other neighborhoods. In fact, studies show that Big Tobacco spends up to 10 times more in these neighborhoods than other areas.⁴
- They market to Black students. A study found that as a high school's African American student population increased, Newport advertising near the school went up and the cost of Newport packs went down.⁵

Role of menthol

Many years ago, the tobacco industry began to develop special cigarette brands for specific groups of people (women, “tough” men, risk-taking young people, etc.) and to heavily advertise those brands in areas where these people live or in the magazines, TV shows, newspapers and other media that they tend to use.

As a result, menthol cigarettes, especially the Newport brand, became preferred among the Black community, so much so that as of May 2020, 88.5% of teen and adult African American smokers used menthol cigarettes.⁶

Even now, the tobacco industry continues to fight to keep menthol cigarettes on shelves to keep Black Americans hooked on tobacco and to get new smokers.

Easier to start, harder to quit

Menthol makes cigarette smoke less harsh, so you don’t cough as much when you inhale. This makes it easier to start smoking. As a result, most Black youth smoke menthols, which gets them hooked on tobacco.⁷

Besides that, the cooling effect of the menthol allows the smoker to take smoke deeper into the lungs (along with nicotine). This may mean that menthol smokers are more addicted than non-menthol users, which would make it more difficult for them to quit.⁸ But they can quit! And we can help.

The tobacco industry spends millions of dollars every year to advertise directly to the Black community. Don’t be fooled.

The best defense

- **Don't start.** Cigarettes are addictive, and avoiding the temptation to start is well worth it. Encourage your family and friends not to start, too.
- **Quit.** It takes the average smoker 5 to 7 tries before stopping successfully, so don't give up! Free help is often available. Ask your health care provider for help, or call us for tips and resources that can give you a better chance of quitting for good.
- **Protect yourself.** Secondhand smoke is toxic. Don't tolerate it! Speak up, and advocate for smoke-free bars, restaurants, clubs, and workplaces.
- **Take a stand.** Join the American Cancer Society Cancer Action NetworkSM (ACS CAN) to speak out for increased tobacco taxes, smoke-free public places, and insurance coverage for quit-smoking treatment and medicines. (ACS CAN is the non-partisan, non-profit advocacy affiliate of the American Cancer Society.)

The tobacco companies have also heavily advertised regular cigars, flavored cigars, and cigarillos to the Black community, who now have the highest rate of use among all races/ethnicities.¹¹ A lot of people think these products are safer than cigarettes.

But remember, there is no safe form of tobacco!

If you quit smoking today, you'll feel a difference after:

- **20 minutes**

Your heart rate and blood pressure drop.

- **12 hours**

The carbon monoxide level in your blood drops to normal.

- **2 weeks to 3 months**

Circulation improves. Lung function increases.

- **1 to 9 months**

Coughing and shortness of breath decrease. Cilia (tiny hair-like structures that move mucus out of the lungs) start to regain normal function in your lungs, increasing the ability to handle mucus, clean the lungs, and reduce the risk of infection.

- **1 year**

The excess risk of coronary heart disease is half that of a continuing smoker's.

- **5 years**

Risks of cancer of the mouth, throat, esophagus, and bladder are cut in half. Cervical cancer risk falls to that of a non-smoker. Stroke risk can fall to that of a non-smoker after 2 to 5 years.

- **10 years**

Your risk of dying from lung cancer is about half that of someone still smoking. Risks of cancer of the larynx (voice box) and pancreas decrease.

- **15 years**

Your risk of coronary heart disease is equal to that of a non-smoker.

Increase your chances of quitting for good. Call your American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** to speak with someone who can help.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Tobacco Use Among U.S. Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups—African Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics: A Report of the Surgeon General. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Office on Smoking and Health, 1998 [accessed 2018 Jun 12].
2. Villarosa, L, "Body and Soul," *Women's Review of Books* 11(10-11):13-4, 1994
3. Landrine, H, et al., "Cigarette advertising in Black, Latino and White magazines, 1998-2002: An exploratory investigation," *Ethnic Disparities* 15(1):63-7, 2005.
4. Anderson, 2016; Moreland-Russel, 2013; Rising 2011; Disparities and Menthol Marketing, Additional Evidence in Support of Point of Sale Policies *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health — Open Access Journal*
5. Henriksen, L., et al., "Targeted Advertising, Promotion, and Price for Menthol Cigarettes in California High School Neighborhoods," *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*, June 24, 2011.
6. Truth Initiative, Tobacco Use in the African American community. <https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/targeted-communities/tobacco-use-african-american-community>
7. Gardiner PS. The African Americanization of Menthol Cigarette Use in the United States. *Nicotine and Tobacco Research* 2004; 6: Suppl 1: S55-65.
8. Foulds J, Hooper MW, Pletcher MJ, Okuyemi KS. Do smokers of menthol cigarettes find it harder to quit smoking? *Nicotine Tob. Res.* 2010;12 Suppl 2(Suppl 2): S102-S109. doi:10.1093/ntr/ntq166
9. Truth Initiative, Tobacco Use in the African American community. <https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/targeted-communities/tobacco-use-african-american-community>



African Americans use tobacco at higher rates than other Americans. Here are some facts to help you protect yourself and the people you love from the risks that come with tobacco use and exposure.

For the latest cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, visit us online at www.cancer.org, or call your American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.



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