

Menthol and Mental Health



**National Behavioral
Health Network**

for Tobacco & Cancer Control

from NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR
MENTAL WELLBEING

Menthol cigarettes combine tobacco with menthol, a compound derived from mint plants, giving them a cool and soothing flavor with anesthetic properties that mask the irritation of tobacco smoke, reduce the harshness and make them more appealing to the consumer.ⁱⁱⁱ Smoking menthol cigarettes, however, also causes deeper inhalation and prolonged holding of smoke in the lungs via one's breath due to bronchodilatation, resulting in menthol cigarette smokers having higher rates of nicotine and cotinine in their blood levels, despite smoking fewer daily cigarettes.^{iii, iv, v}

The use of menthol cigarettes is of significant concern due to its impact on overall health, as well as significantly contributing to poor mental health outcomes. Menthol cigarettes have historically been marketed toward specific communities, such as Black/African Americans, resulting in a higher prevalence of menthol cigarette use. Understanding menthol cigarettes' impact on mental wellbeing is crucial to addressing the potential health effects for individuals and communities through clinical and public health interventions.

MENTHOL CIGARETTE USE

- Menthol cigarette use is more common among certain racial/ethnic groups. Black/African Americans have the highest prevalence of menthol cigarette use at 80%, followed by Hispanic/Latinx communities at 50% use.^{vi}
- Younger adults (ages 18-24) report higher rates of menthol cigarette use compared to older age groups. Among young people who currently smoked cigarettes, 53% reported using menthol cigarettes.^{vi}
- LGBTQ+ smokers report higher rates of smoking menthol cigarettes at 36% compared to 29% of heterosexual smokers.^{vii}



MENTHOL ADVERSELY IMPACTS MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES



Menthol cigarette use is associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety and an overall higher rate of mental health comorbidities. These conditions can also interact with smoking behaviors, for example increased use to counteract anxiety symptoms despite tobacco use exacerbating anxiety, creating a cycle of addiction and poor mental health outcomes.^{viii}



Adults who smoke and have mental health challenges are more likely to use menthol cigarettes and are more likely to have used a menthol cigarette as their first cigarette.^{ix, x}



Menthol cigarettes are associated with progression to regular smoking of non-menthol cigarettes. They also are associated with worse cessation outcomes than non-menthol cigarette use. Research suggests that menthol cigarette smokers may have a harder time quitting because the cooling sensation of menthol makes it more challenging to give up smoking. An inability to quit smoking can also exacerbate mental health challenges and impact self-efficacy, particularly if smoking is used as a coping mechanism for stress or anxiety.^{xi}



While tobacco use in general is associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety, menthol cigarettes are correlated with greater mental health symptoms in young people.^{xii} Studies show that young people are more likely to try a menthol cigarette as their first cigarette, and young people who first start smoking with a menthol cigarette are more likely to continue smoking overall.^{xii, xiii, xiv} Young people with serious mental health challenges use menthol cigarettes and other menthol tobacco products at much higher rates than those without serious mental health challenges.^{xii}



While there is a relationship between menthol cigarette use and poorer mental health outcomes, establishing singular causality is challenging. It's difficult to determine whether menthol cigarettes directly cause anxiety, for example, or if the relationship is mediated by other factors, such as bidirectional influences, genetics, psychosocial factors or pre-existing anxiety disorders that are further exacerbated by smoking. Despite limited singular causality research, menthol cigarettes make smoking cessation more challenging and are associated with a higher prevalence of mental health comorbidities.



The elevated use of menthol cigarettes for people with mental health challenges further emphasizes the need to address regulating menthol cigarettes nationally, while also ensuring that tobacco treatment planning around menthol simultaneously addresses psychological distress and other mental health challenges.^{xv} Addressing menthol cigarette use requires a comprehensive approach that includes critical regulatory changes, strong public health initiatives and comprehensive interventions to support individuals in simultaneously quitting smoking and improving their mental wellbeing.

Citations

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