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PCME QUIZ

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Terri Richardson

Menthol Cigarette Use in African Americans

In the United States, cigarette smoking remains both the single most preventable cause of death and the single greatest cause of cancer. Among African-American men, the toll is especially high. Compared with white men, they generally start smoking later in life and smoke fewer cigarettes, but they have a 60% higher incidence of lung cancer (though the incidence of lung cancer differs little by race in women). One possible explanation for this paradox is the menthol brand preference of African Americans. Because of this, several researchers have studied the effects of menthol and its possible relationship to lung cancer.

In 1995, S. Sidney and coworkers found that the relative risk of lung cancer associated with mentholated (compared with nonmentholated) cigarettes was 1.45 in men (though it was only 0.75 in women). Additionally, the duration of mentholated cigarette use was directly related to the incidence of lung cancer in men. Although some investigators think that menthol use does not explain the higher lung cancer rates found in African-American men, this study deserves public attention and should prompt further research.

Menthol is known to stimulate thermal-sensitive fibers of the lingual nerve, producing a sensation of coolness; thus it has been used in some cigarette brands to counteract the perceived burning sensation of tobacco smoke. Although menthol cigarettes are mild in flavor, they tend to be higher in tar and nicotine than brands without menthol. Several studies, including one by W. J. McCarthy and coworkers, have shown that smokers took fewer puffs per cigarette and had lower mean volumes per puff when they were smoking menthol cigarettes rather than a nonmentholated brand. However, this decreased aggregate ex-

posure to cigarette smoke was not accompanied by any decrease in the physiologic measures correlated with nicotine exposure, such as heart rate. Also, mentholated cigarettes appear to provide a greater boost to levels of expired carbon monoxide than do brands without menthol.

It has been well documented that 75% to 90% of African-American smokers prefer menthol cigarettes. This preference for mentholated brands is independent of educational level and occupation. Even African-American teenage smokers prefer menthol.

Menthol cigarettes were introduced in the 1930s but did not exceed 3% of the total market until 1949. By 1976, their market share was 28%. Sales to African Americans accounted for the vast majority of the increase. It is probably no coincidence that advertising for menthol cigarettes began appearing in magazines for African Americans in the 1960s.

Today, menthol cigarettes are heavily advertised in magazines with a largely African-American audience. Recently, as I thumbed through several such magazines, I noticed menthol cigarette ads strategically placed on the inside front and back covers. In addition, tobacco companies continue to heavily advertise menthol cigarettes directly (on billboards, for example) in African-American communities; \$5.8 million was spent for that purpose in 1988. In 1990, R. J. Reynolds spent \$10 million on an advertising campaign for the menthol brand Uptown. Uptown had slick

Dr. Richardson is Assistant Professor, Department of Internal Medicine, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, and Clinical Leader, Internal Medicine Clinic, Eastside Community Health Center, Denver.

-Terri Richardson-

packaging and an inviting slogan: "The place, the taste." This campaign specifically targeted African-American smokers; the campaign was aborted, and the brand withdrawn, when there was an outcry from the African-American community.

The puzzle of why African-American men are more likely to get lung cancer than white men despite starting to smoke at a later age remains to be solved. However, given the high levels of nicotine dependence and lower cessation rates in African-American smokers and the lack of definitive knowledge about what effect menthol has on the incidence of lung cancer, perhaps it would be prudent to recommend that African Americans switch to a nonmentholated brand until they quit. We can continue to remind African Americans of the hazards of smoking and still emphasize that menthol cigarettes may pose additional hazards to their health.

Selected Reading

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