

# Menthol habit hits black smokers

Smokers of menthol cigarettes find it harder to quit than those smoking regular cigarettes, researchers said yesterday, perhaps explaining why blacks in the US suffer disproportionately from smoking-related ailments, writes Reuters in Chicago.

For a variety of historical and cultural reasons, including targeted advertising, about 70 per cent of black smokers smoked menthol cigarettes such as Kool or Newport compared with about 30 per cent of white smokers, said the study, which was published in the Archives of Internal Medicine.

This, combined with the difficulty in kicking the menthol cigarette habit, could help researchers figure out why blacks in the US have higher rates of cancer, heart disease and other smoking-related illnesses even though they generally smoke less, the study said.

The study, which looked at the smoking habits of 1,535 people over 15 years, did not determine why menthol cigarettes were harder to kick than regular tobacco cigarettes, said Dr Mark Pletcher of the University of California, San Francisco, the lead author of the study.

“Beyond the obvious, that they’re sort of more pleasant to smoke, there is some evidence that it [menthol] inhibits the metabolism of nicotine, the addictive component,” he said.

“So it [nicotine] will last longer. You may get a bigger hit or a longer-lasting hit when you have menthol, though that is still speculation.”

Menthol “was associated with a lower likelihood of trying to quit in the first place”, the study said. It added that menthol smokers, if they did quit, were almost twice as likely to relapse after trying to stop and also less likely to stop for a sustained period.

Dr Pletcher’s study of 808 women and 727 men found that 69 per cent of those who smoked menthol cigarettes in 1985 were still smoking in 2000, compared with 54 per cent of smokers who bought regular cigarettes.

The study said it found no evidence that peppermint oil-based menthol itself made such cigarettes more dangerous.

“Menthol and non-menthol cigarettes seem to be equally harmful per cigarette smoked” in terms of heart disease and declines in lung function, it concluded.