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Richmond Times-Dispatch

Published: July 16, 2010

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Tobacco firms say menthol no hazard to smoking

By DAVID RESS

For about one-third of smokers, menthol makes a cigarette taste better -- but it doesn't make it harder to quit and doesn't appear to entice teens to smoke, tobacco companies told a key federal panel yesterday. And they've found no evidence that menthol cigarettes are more toxic than regular smokes, the companies told the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee.

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The panel, meeting yesterday in Gaithersburg, Md., is supposed to recommend how menthol cigarettes are regulated by next year -- including whether they should be banned.

For the industry, billions of dollars of sales a year are at stake.

Menthol cigarette sales are declining, though R.J. Reynolds marketing operations director Monica J. Graves said there has been a slight recent rise in the percentage of smokers choosing menthol brands.

"This dynamic is not explained by marketing or by the amount of menthol in the product," she said, adding that sales and price data show tobacco companies offer fewer promotions for menthol cigarettes.

"The menthol in Lorillard brands is simply designed to complement tobacco taste. Assertions Lorillard is trying to generate a physiological effect are simply not correct," William R. True, senior vice president for research and development at Lorillard Tobacco Co., the top seller of menthol cigarettes.

There aren't inadvertent biological effects, either, said Jane Lewis, senior vice president at Henrico County-based Altria Client Services, a sister company of the nation's top cigarette-maker, Philip Morris

USA.

"Menthol added to cigarettes does not increase risks of smoking. Menthol does not increase cigarette dependence. It does not affect cessation," she said.

Altria anchored much of its case on an internal one-year study of 3,585 adult smokers, including 1,104 menthol smokers. In addition, the study looked at 1,077 non-smokers.

That study, one of the largest ever of people smoking naturally as opposed to the often-forced or paced smoking in laboratory studies, found:

- no sign that menthol smokers ingested more smoke;
- menthol smokers tended to smoke fewer cigarettes a day;
- no sign menthol smokers showed more biological changes that can foreshadow illness or cancer;
- no sign menthol affected how smokers metabolize nicotine, the addictive substance in cigarettes;
- no sign menthol affects how smokers metabolize nicotine-derived nitrosamine ketone, a potent carcinogen; and
- no sign menthol smokers were more likely to score higher on a standard test of nicotine dependence.

Altria's Lewis said that supported findings in published epidemiological studies that menthol smokers are not more likely to suffer smoking-related diseases than other smokers.

In its submission, Altria said only one study has ever looked at whether menthol cigarettes particularly appeal to teenagers -- and found no significant differences in teen's sensory reactions to menthol as opposed to regular cigarettes.

Other studies found no difference in when smokers of menthol and regular cigarettes started, the companies said.

Altria's written submission also reported that nine national studies of smokers -- ranging from 1,021 people who sought help quitting to 19,545 current and former smokers -- found no difference in the percentages of menthol and non-menthol smokers who quit.

An informal group of tobacco control experts yesterday said menthol's anesthetic effect tricks smokers into thinking their cigarettes are less harsh and therefore safer.

The group, which calls itself the Shadow Panel, said the FDA should simply ban menthol cigarettes.

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