Background

Although efforts have been made to eliminate the use of misleading descriptors such as “low tar,” “lights,” and “mild” from cigarette marketing, the elimination of the cigarette filter, which is on 99.7% of cigarettes sold in United States, has been largely overlooked as a tobacco control strategy. The 2014 U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on the Health Consequences of Smoking and the 2001 U.S. National Cancer Institute Monograph 13 report that the near-universal adoption of smokers of filtered cigarettes since their introduction in the 1930s has not reduced these consumers’ risks for cancer and other diseases (1). Moreover, the non-biodegradable filter is the main component of tobacco product waste in the environment.

A Brief History of Filtered Cigarette Advertising

From the UA Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society

Filters are a Health Hazard

• As with flavorings such as menthol, filters facilitate nicotine addiction by making smoking less harsh and thus easier for youth to start smoking. For existing smokers, the tobacco industry fostered consumer complacency and false security about the implied protection that the filter could confer, diminishing the urgency to quit smoking.

• Lung cancer risks among smokers have doubled for men and increased by almost 10 times for women from 1960-1980; relative risks for and incidence of the more aggressive adenocarcinoma increased from 4.6 to 19.0 among men and from 1.5 to 8.1 among women (6).

• The use of ventilation in cigarette filters has also failed to make them safer and more than likely has made them more harmful (2,3). Smokers who switched to low-tar cigarettes employed compensatory smoking, whereby they inhale more frequently and more deeply to maintain nicotine dosing. Such compensatory behavior offsets any theoretical benefit of ventilated filters and results in increased inhaled carbon monoxide and increased cardiovascular risk.

• The tobacco industry has known for decades that the filter does not provide protection from the adverse effects of smoking (7).

Toxic Tobacco Product Waste

• Most filters are made of cellulose acetate, a non-biodegradable plastic material. As discarded trash, they are the single most common waste item picked up over the last 30 years on beaches and urban cleanups worldwide (4).

• The leachates produced by soaking butts for 96 hours in fresh or salt water have been found to have a LOD50 for test fish of one cigarette butt per liter. According to this U.S. Environmental Protection Agency protocol, cigarette butts should therefore be considered toxic hazardous waste and regulated as such (5).

• 5.6 trillion cigs are smoked globally each year, and up to 2/3s are dumped irresponsibly somewhere into the environment.

Conclusions

1. There is sufficient evidence that cigarette filters are a fraud, primarily acting as a marketing tool with which the tobacco industry has deceived the public about some “health benefit” from smoking filtered compared with unfiltered cigarettes.

2. The cellulose acetate filter comprises the bulk of tobacco waste, which is a toxic hazardous waste product and therefore should be further regulated as such by national, state, or local jurisdictions.

3. Banning sales of filtered cigarettes is likely to reduce cigarette consumption, denormalize smoking, and result in fewer children starting to smoke.

4. Policy makers and health providers need to reinforce the fact that these filters are not safer; rather, they are more harmful (2,3). Smokers who switch to low-tar cigarettes may compensate for the decrease in lung cancer risks by increasing their compensatory smoking, whereby they inhale more frequently and more deeply to maintain nicotine dosing.

5. Further research is needed on the health and behavioral impact of filters and on how to move filters from the global cigarette market, but banning thesale of filtered cigarettes should be implemented now without further delay.

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