

The Filter Fraud: Debunking the Myth of “Safer” as a Key New Strategy of Tobacco Control

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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 U.S) 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 by smokers of filtered cigarettes since their introduction in the 1950s has not reduced these consumers’ risks for cancer and other diseases (1). Moreover, the non-biodegradable filter is the source of significant environmental tobacco product waste..

Ninety Years of Filter Fraud

1. In the 1950s, confronted with declining cigarette sales after the publication of research studies linking smoking to lung cancer, tobacco companies began producing filter tipped brands that were claimed to remove certain components of the smoke, which manufacturers never acknowledged to be harmful. This included use of charcoal, asbestos, and other materials. Kent “Micronite” filters marketed in 1950s contained asbestos (3).
2. Lower machine-measured tar and nicotine yields were thought by smokers to reduce cancer risks; “light,” “low tar,” and “mild” became key advertising messages despite growing evidence of increased risks for lung cancer. (These fraudulent terms are now banned from use in the USA) (2).
3. Machine-measured machine yields were due to ventilated filters—i.e., holes in the filter that may create deceptive filtration results and that may be occluded by smokers to compensate for less ‘flavor’ or nicotine dose (2,3).
4. Of note is that throughout the 1970s the American Cancer Society, the National Cancer Institute, and most major health organizations promoted the concept of a “less hazardous” cigarette in the belief that most people who smoke would not or could not stop.
5. All major medical journals (JAMA, NEJM, BMJ, The Lancet, and many state medical journals) continued to accept cigarette advertising well into the 1960s.

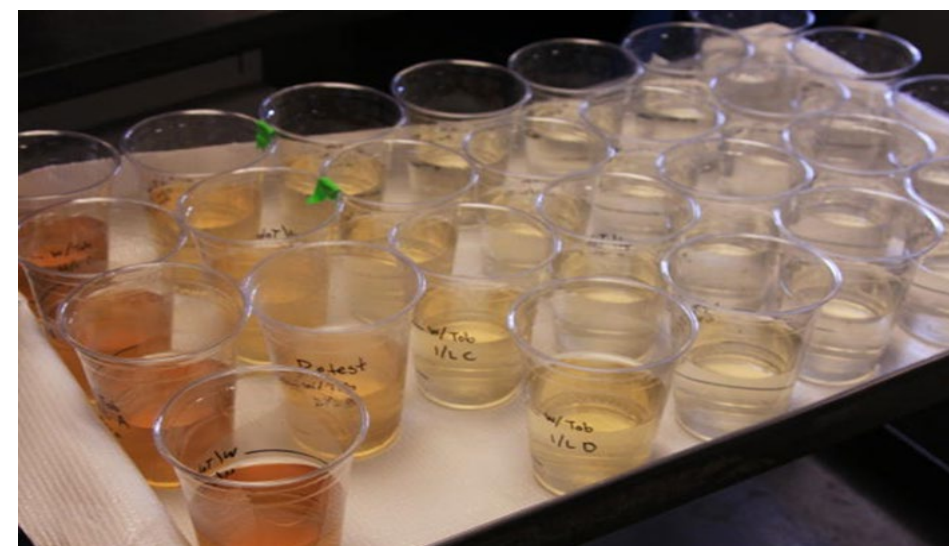


Damning Evidence that Filters are a Health Hazard

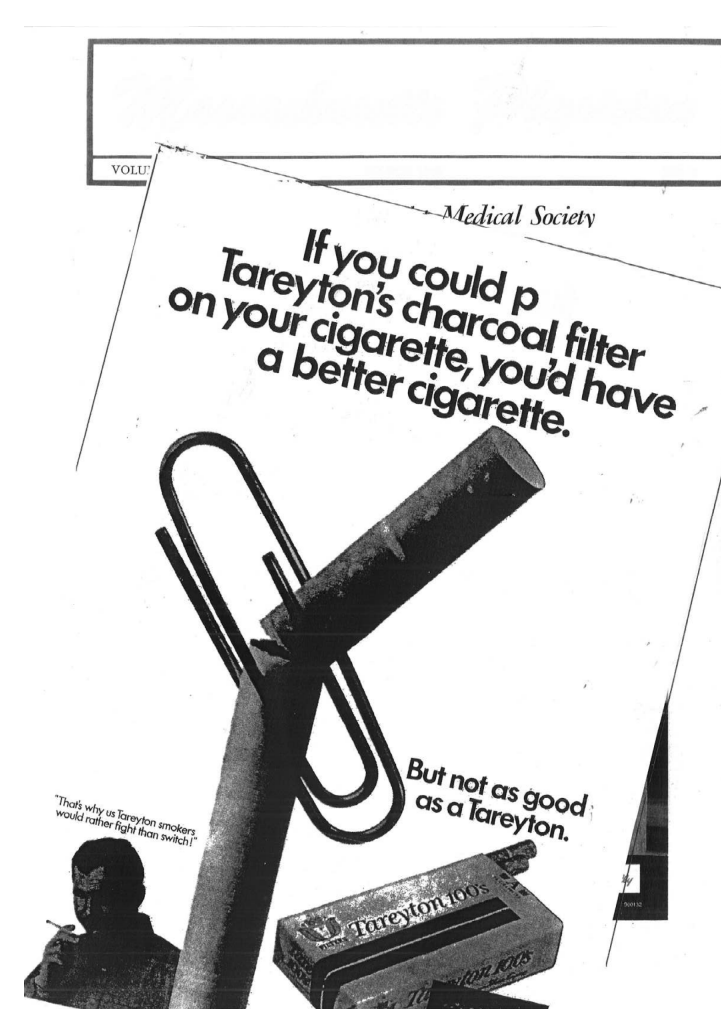
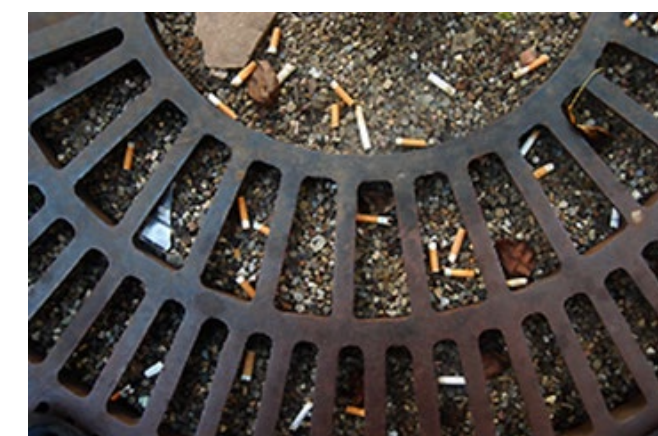
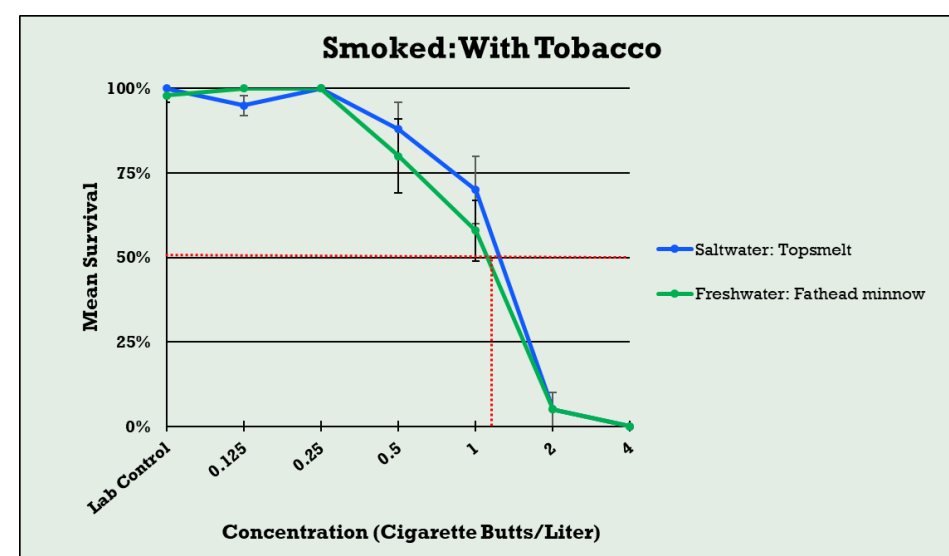
1. Like flavorings such as menthol, filters facilitate nicotine addiction and make it easier for youth to start smoking and discourage smokers from quitting. The tobacco industry encouraged consumer complacency and false security about the ‘safety’ of the filter.
2. Lung cancer risks among smokers have doubled for men and increased by almost 10 times for women from 1960-1980; relative risks for adenocarcinoma increased from 4.6 to 19.0 among men and from 1.5 to 8.1 among women (6).
3. 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.
4. The tobacco industry has known for decades that the filter does not provide protection from the adverse health consequences of smoking (7).

Toxic Tobacco Product Waste

1. Most filters are made of cellulose acetate, a non-biodegradable plastic material which, as discarded waste, are the single most common waste item picked up over the last 30 years on beaches and urban cleanups worldwide (4).
2. The leachates produced by soaking butts for 96 hours in fresh or salt water have been found to have a LD50 for test fish of one cigarette butt/liter. According to this U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Protocol, cigarette butts should therefore be considered toxic hazardous waste and regulated as such (5*).
3. 5.6 Trillion Smoked Each Year, 2/3 dumped into environment



Item rank	Item	No. of Debris Items	Percentage of Total Debris Items
1	cigarettes/filters	52,907,756	32%
2	food wrappers/containers	14,766,533	9%
3	caps, lids	13,585,425	8%
4	cups, plates, forks, knives, spoons	10,112,038	6%
5	beverage bottles (plastic)	9,549,156	6%
6	bags (plastic)	7,825,319	5%
7	beverage bottles (glass)	7,062,199	4%
8	beverage cans	6,753,260	4%
9	straws/stirrers	6,263,453	4%
10	rope	3,251,948	2%
Top ten total debris items		132,077,087	80%
Total debris items worldwide		166,144,420	100%



Policy Options to Eliminate the Filter Fraud	Rationale	Jurisdiction	Likely Outcome
Product labeling (8)	Increases smoker awareness of filter risk	National	Modest impact on smoker behavior
Litigation (9)	Cost recovery for environmental damage, nuisance	Local, state, national	De-normalization of tobacco use, internalization of environmental and health costs
Extended producer responsibility (10)	Takeback & waste product stewardship	Local, state, national	Higher cost of distribution
Banning sale of filtered cigarettes (3)	Corrective action on fraudulent product, upstream waste management	Local, state, national	De-normalizes smoking, reduced consumption
Public education (1) & Counter-advertising (11)	Change perceptions through effective direct messaging	National	Increased public awareness of fraud

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 into believing there is some ‘health benefit’ from smoking filtered cigarettes compared with unfiltered cigarettes.
2. The cellulose acetate filter comprises the bulk of tobacco product waste, which can be considered a toxic hazardous waste product and therefore further regulated as such by local jurisdictions.
3. Banning the sale of filtered cigarettes is likely to reduce cigarette consumption, further denormalize smoking, and result in fewer children starting to smoke.
4. Policy makers and health providers need to reinforce the fact to all who still smoke cigarettes that the filter does not confer any health protection whatsoever.
5. Further research is needed on the health and behavioral impact of removing filters from the global cigarette market, but banning the sale of filtered cigarettes may be taken now without further research.

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