

Low-nitrosamine cigarettes go on sale

■ Star's Advance, which has lower levels of some toxins, being test-marketed

By Adrian Zawada
JOURNAL REPORTER

Star Scientific Inc. began selling low-nitrosamine cigarettes in selected Kentucky and Virginia test markets yesterday to attract smokers who want a cigarette with less potential to cause cancer.

The cigarettes, called Advance, have 73 percent less tobacco-specific nitrosamines (TSNAs), which are acknowledged by public-health advocates as among the most potent of 40 known carcinogens in ciga-

rette smoke. Advance cigarettes will also contain reduced levels of such other toxins as hydrogen cyanide, and their packaging will include detailed health warnings taking up the entire back of the cigarette packs.

"We have an obligation to make Advance available to adult tobacco consumers along with information about the comparable toxic constituents of smoke," said Paul Perito, the company's president and chairman. "Star hopes that the start of its limited test market of Advance will serve as an incentive to the traditional tobacco industry to consider producing and appropriately labeling potentially less-toxic cigarette products in a similar fashion."

Star Scientific is the first tobacco company to sell low-nitrosamine cigarettes and the latest to market cigarettes that the public might perceive as a safer smoking alternative. Advance's two test markets are Richmond and Lexington, Ky.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. has invested more than \$1 billion in developing its smokeless cigarette, Eclipse, and its failed predecessor, Premier.

RJR's Eclipse heats tobacco instead of burning it, and the company says it might present smokers with less risk of lung cancer, chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

The nation's No. 2 tobacco company is selling Eclipse by the carton over the Internet and in four test markets, including

Dallas-Fort Worth. Star Scientific is taking a much different approach in marketing Advance compared to RJR's marketing of Eclipse.

The company is making no health claims, admitting on its Advance cigarette packs that "there is not enough evidence available to know if Star's methods will actually lower your health risks."

RJR announced two weeks ago that company scientists found no reduction in the toxicity of low-nitrosamine tobacco when exposing the smoke to animals and DNA cells.

Tobacco-control advocates said that RJR

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made the announcement out of concern for profit, not public health, with the goal of lowering public interest in low-nitrosamine products in order to retain its competitive advantage in the small market for less-risky cigarettes.

Star Scientific will also avoid the standard cigarette-advertising practices for Advance, although it will use a slogan, "Know what you smoke."

The Eclipse advertising campaign included standard marketing tools, including magazine ads.

Considering that Star Scientific can't say whether Advance cigarettes reduce smoking risks, "you're comparing apples and oranges" with regard to its potential competitiveness with RJR's Eclipse, said Seth Moskowitz, an RJR spokesman. "Eclipse is the only cigarette available that has scientific substantiation to make the claim that it may present less risk," Moskowitz said, adding that Advance and Eclipse aren't even in the same category of cigarettes.

Cigarette companies shouldn't market the fact that they are using low-nitrosamine tobacco, said John Slade, an expert on reduced-risk tobacco products and a professor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. Slade and other public-health advocates fear that some smokers will inevitably perceive low-nitrosamine cigarettes as safer, even if they aren't, which may prevent smokers from quitting.

"I applaud them for the warnings they put on their packs, but I am concerned about the statements about nitrosamines because this is difficult information for consumers to understand," Slade said. "It may falsely raise expectations for some consumers."

Although Star Scientific and RJR said they have found no reduction in health risks, scientists as Brown & Williamson Corp. said that the low-nitrosamine tobacco performed better in a DNA-mutation test.

Brown & Williamson is manufacturing Advance cigarettes for Star Scientific, and has bought 12.5 million pounds of Star's low-nitrosamine tobacco.

Perito said that Brown & Williamson is making the cigarettes and the packaging because it has better machinery.

In its public relations, Star Scientific is trying to distinguish itself from the other cigarette companies, which have been found liable in court cases for fraud, misrepresentation and making a dangerous and defective product. The company, from Chester, Va., describes itself as a "technology-oriented tobacco company with a health-related mission." Slade said it is in fact a different tobacco company because it prints large warnings on cigarette packs.

Advance cigarette packs will have such warning labels as "smoking can take years off your life. It's much safer for you to quit than to switch or smoke."

They will also contain a charcoal/acetate filter.

The company makes 21 million pounds of flue-cured, low-nitrosamine tobacco through its patented StarCure method in its Petersburg, Va., plant, and has produced 1.5 mil-

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lion pounds of low-nitrosamine burley tobacco this year as well.

Star Scientific's low-nitrosamine tobacco has no difference in color, taste or nicotine content from tobacco that hasn't undergone its patented StarCure process.

The tobacco also contains 30 percent less hydrogen cyanide than a typical light cigarette and 15 percent less benzene. It has 47 percent more formaldehyde and equal amounts of nicotine as a light cigarette.

Ultimately, Star Scientific's goal is to sell off its Advance cigarette brand after five years and focus on the tobacco technology processing business, Perito said.

"We assume that Advance will be licensed

by other companies," Perito said. "We would love to see Brown & Williamson ultimately license and take over the product. They have superior ability to penetrate the market."

Reduced-risk cigarettes are like the frozen dinners of the 1950s, said David Adelman, a tobacco-stocks analyst at Morgan Stanley Dean Witter in New York.

"The 1950s frozen dinners were horrible, they were putrid," Adelman said. "But today, frozen dinners are accepted as high-quality, convenient, and people use them all the time. That's the context to think of this product."

It will be a few decades before they are ever a significant part of the cigarette market and profitable, he said.

Low-nitrosamine tobacco is no breakthrough in making a safer cigarette, an impossible feat in itself, said Alan Blum, who holds the Gerald Leon Wallace chair in family medicine at the University of Alabama.

Cigarette companies have been marketing less-risky cigarettes to the public ever since they introduced filtered cigarettes in 1931, he said. Just as filtered cigarettes and light cigarettes did nothing to make smoking less dangerous, neither will low-nitrosamine cigarettes, Blum said.

"Reducing nitrosamines doesn't have anything to do with the other dangers of smoking," Blum said. "No one knows whether they contribute to 20 percent of a victim's cancer or zero percent. It won't save lives."

Public-health authorities insisted yesterday that the lack of scientific evidence further demonstrates the need for Food and Drug Administration jurisdiction over tobacco products.