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Public Health Solutions urges public to take action against unjust marketing and promotion of menthol cigarettes

New statewide “It’s Not Just” campaign aimed at hard-hitting menthol-flavored tobacco product marketing targeting Black communities

NEW YORK, N.Y. – A new statewide initiative aims to put a spotlight on how the tobacco industry has specifically targeted African American communities for decades with its aggressive marketing of menthol-flavored tobacco products.^{1,2} The “It’s Not Just” campaign launched regionally and statewide on No Menthol Sunday, May 16, and is focused on ending the misconception that menthol is just a flavor. It’s not just an injustice, it’s killing Black Americans.

Smoking-related illnesses are the No. 1 cause of death in the African American community, surpassing all other causes of death, including AIDS, homicide, diabetes and accidents.^{3,4,5} Overall, 85% of African American smokers use menthol cigarettes, compared to 29% of white smokers.^{3,6}

The “It’s Not Just” campaign is intended to educate people across New York State about the injustice of menthol-flavored tobacco product marketing and promotion. The campaign uses direct language and powerful, emotional imagery of people who represent communities targeted by Big Tobacco. It describes how menthol is more than a flavor, highlighting hard-hitting facts about the manipulative, aggressive nature of menthol tobacco marketing and its impact on African American communities.

“The time has come to hold Big Tobacco accountable for sacrificing Black lives for their bottom line,” said Deidre Sully, director, Public Health Solutions’ NYC Smoke-Free. “It’s not just when an industry has free range to devastate an entire group of people.”

Individuals can learn more about how to help fight the injustice of menthol-flavored tobacco products at the new campaign’s website: NotJustMenthol.org.

“With the recent FDA announcement to ban menthol-flavored tobacco products, this campaign couldn’t be more timely and relevant,” said LaTroya Hester, director of communications, The Center for Black Health & Equity. “We know that the tobacco industry will fight this decision with the full force of its legal and marketing power, but we’re not intimidated. The Center is excited about the launch of this campaign, and we are so honored to contribute to much-needed counter-messaging.”

While the tobacco industry has traditionally targeted Black communities with the marketing of menthol products, menthol is also a driver of youth initiation.^{7,8} When New York State ended the sale of flavored e-cigarettes statewide in May 2020, it was a significant step toward reducing youth tobacco use. However,

other flavored tobacco products, such as menthol cigarettes, continue to present an obstacle to decreasing tobacco use among young people and underserved populations.

“It is abundantly clear that the removal of menthol cigarettes is not only a social justice issue, it is also an issue of injustice that has continued for far too long,” said Lorraine Braithwaite-Hart, health chair, NAACP New York State Conference. “The tobacco industry has used menthol to hook and kill thousands of Black people; we are taking a stand and saying ‘No More’ because it is not just.”

“The American Heart Association stands with our partners working to address the burden of menthol-flavored tobacco products in our communities,” stated Lawrence Philips, M.D., board president, American Heart Association in New York City. “Big Tobacco has successfully targeted minority populations with menthol products for decades, resulting in more than 70% of adolescent African-American smokers and more than half of adolescent Latino smokers using menthol. The cooling properties of menthol cigarettes also make them more appealing to youth; more than half of youth smokers age 12-17 use menthol cigarettes, compared to less than one-third of older adult smokers. These products have been shown to increase initiation, especially among youth, enhance the addictiveness and dependence on tobacco and decrease successful quit attempts.”

We know that tobacco companies have used menthol-flavored tobacco products to attract Black Americans to a lifetime of addiction for generations,” said Trevor Summerfield, director of advocacy, New York American Lung Association. It’s time to end Big Tobacco’s predatory marketing tactics and set the record straight about the real health impacts of menthol cigarettes.”

Additional statistics:

- Menthol marketing
 - Menthol use among Black communities is a direct result of the tobacco industry’s marketing practices and product manipulation.^{7,9}
 - Historically, the marketing and promotion of menthol cigarettes have been targeted heavily toward African Americans through culturally tailored advertising and messages.^{1,2,10}
 - Menthol products are given more shelf space in retail outlets within African American and other minority neighborhoods.^{1,11}
 - In addition to being heavily advertised and widely available, certain tobacco products have been found to be priced lower in African American communities, making them more appealing, particularly to price-sensitive youth.^{12,13,14}
- Menthol usage
 - Ninety-three percent of Black smokers started by using menthol cigarettes.^{15,16}
 - Over 7 out of 10 African American youth ages 12-17 years who smoke use menthol cigarettes.^{1,17}
 - Research indicates that menthol makes smoking easier to start and harder to quit.^{18,19}
 - Tobacco companies add menthol to make cigarettes seem less harsh and more appealing to new smokers and young people.¹⁵
 - Tobacco companies market menthol cigarettes as “smoother” than other cigarettes.^{2,15}
 - Menthol in cigarettes creates a cooling sensation in the throat and airways when the user inhales.^{2,9,15}
- Health impact
 - Menthol cigarettes are not less harmful than other cigarettes and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has found that they are likely a greater risk to public health than non-menthol cigarettes.^{2,15}
 - Black smokers smoke less but die of heart attacks, strokes and other causes linked to tobacco use at higher rates than white smokers.^{1,20-24}

Support available for New Yorkers who want to quit

For help quitting smoking or vaping, including free nicotine replacement therapy for eligible

residents, individuals can contact a health care provider, and call the New York State Smokers' Quitline at 1-866-NY-QUITS or visit: nysmokefree.com. Effective medications and counseling are covered by Medicaid and most insurance programs.

Tobacco Free New York State and Reality Check student groups around the state have worked tirelessly to educate local communities on the tobacco industry's use of menthol and other flavored tobacco products as a tool to target, attract and addict new smokers. Tobacco Free New York State, including the Reality Check student youth groups, is part of the NYS Tobacco Control Program.

About NYC Smoke-Free

NYC Smoke-Free, a program of Public Health Solutions, works to protect the health of New Yorkers through advocacy and education. We support local efforts to end the devastating tobacco epidemic throughout NYC, where close to 1 million residents smoke. The majority of smokers start and become hooked before age 18 – it is unacceptable for NYC youth to be lured into a life of tobacco addiction. Every NYC resident has the right to breathe clean, smoke-free air where they live, work and play, and people who smoke deserve the support and resources to quit. Learn more at: nycsmokefree.org.

About Public Health Solutions

Public Health Solutions (PHS) is the largest public health nonprofit serving New York City. For over 60 years, PHS has improved health outcomes and helped families thrive by providing services directly to the city's most vulnerable populations, publishing groundbreaking research and supporting over 200 community-based organizations through our long-standing government partnerships. We are a leader in addressing crucial public health issues, including food and nutrition, health insurance access, maternal and child health, reproductive health, tobacco control and HIV/AIDS prevention. PHS has a strong focus on health equity to ensure NYC families have the basics for a healthier life.

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