After Years of Pressure, FDA Pledges to Ban Menthol Cigarettes

The FDA says the action should help save lives and will take effect within the next year.

May 6, 2021 By Alicia Green

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently issued a news release announcing its plan to ban menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars in an effort to decrease tobacco-related diseases and deaths in the United States and help more smokers to quit.

“Banning menthol—the last allowable flavor—in cigarettes and banning all flavors in cigars will help save lives, particularly among those disproportionately affected by these deadly products,” said Janet Woodcock, MD, acting FDA commissioner.

Black Americans and young people disproportionately consume these products, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in part because the tobacco industry aggressively markets menthol products to these groups, according to the CDC.

Young people are also more likely than any other age group to smoke menthol cigarettes. More than half of youth between ages 12 and 17 who smoke tobacco use menthol cigarettes.

The FDA’s action comes after years of advocacy by community groups and health organizations calling for the agency to address the negative effects of smoking menthol tobacco products on African Americans.

In a CNN story, Derrick Johnson, the president of the NAACP, said, “For decades, the tobacco industry has been targeting African Americans and [has] contributed to the skyrocketing rates of heart disease, stroke and cancer across our community…it’s about time we prioritize the health and well-being of African Americans.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics called the FDA’s statement “an important step forward.”

The FDA also pointed out that low-income and LGBTQ people are also more likely to use menthol cigarettes.

Smoking tobacco of any kind is associated with an increased risk for serious illness and death. Findings show that menthol—a chemical compound found naturally in peppermint and similar

plants—in cigarettes is what likely leads people to start smoking, especially young people.

The FDA cited a study published in BMJ that found that a ban on menthol cigarettes would result in an additional 923,000 smokers quitting, including 230,000 Black Americans, in the first 13 to 17 months after taking effect.

In addition, another study estimated that nearly 633,000 deaths would be averted, including the lives of about 237,000 African Americans.

For related coverage, read "FDA to Address Increased Use of E-Cigs Among Youth" and "Makers of Kid-Friendly E-Cigs to Face FDA Enforcement Action."

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