

Flavours in Cigarettes, Vaping Products, and Heated Tobacco Products in Canada

EVIDENCE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL TOBACCO CONTROL
POLICY EVALUATION PROJECT

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BACKGROUND

As a part of its global marketing strategies to attract new users, particularly youth and young adults, the tobacco industry in many countries adds flavours and other chemicals to its products and highlights ‘flavour’ and ‘taste’ in their branding efforts. Flavours improve the taste and mask the harshness of tobacco products, making it easier for young people to try these products and increasing their risk of addiction.^{1,2,3}

The sale, marketing, and use of flavoured tobacco products vary across different countries. For example, the Canadian cigarette market is comprised almost exclusively of Virginia flue-cured tobacco, which has lower levels of certain chemical additives compared to cigarettes from the United States (US) that are made of a combination of different types of tobacco (Virginia flue-cured, burley air-cured, and reconstituted tobacco). The estimated market share for menthol flavoured cigarettes based on cigarette sales data reported by tobacco manufacturers is considerably smaller in Canada (~5% in 2016)⁴ compared to the US (~35% in 2018)⁵, where marketing of menthol cigarettes has historically been targeted toward African Americans.⁵ There is also a wide range in the self-reported use of menthol cigarettes across countries, from less than 1% in Spain (2016) to 12% in England (2016) to 40% in the US (2019).^{6,7}

This report presents findings from the ITC Wave 3 (2020) Canada Smoking and Vaping Survey of a nationally representative sample of 3650 adult (aged 18 years and over) smokers, vapers, and heated tobacco users with a focus on: (1) Canadian menthol smokers’ responses to the 2017 national menthol ban and smokers’ perceptions of the harms of menthol cigarettes; and (2) use of flavoured vaping and heated tobacco products in Canada and potential responses to restrictions on flavoured vaping products. ITC Canada Survey data for selected measures are also compared with ITC 2020 Survey data from Australia, England, and the US. Full details on the sampling and survey methods in each country are presented in the ITC Four Country Smoking and Vaping Survey technical reports, available at: <https://itcproject.org/methods>. Note that other types of flavoured tobacco products, such as waterpipe, smokeless tobacco, nicotine pouches, and others are beyond the scope of this report.

Flavour bans in cigarettes and non-cigarette tobacco products

Menthol is the most common flavouring added to cigarettes. Menthol creates a cooling sensation that masks the harshness of cigarette smoke. Studies have shown that menthol cigarettes lead to increased experimentation and progression to regular smoking among youth in particular, greater nicotine dependence, and decreased quit success.^{8,9,10,11} Because of menthol’s effect on reducing harshness, menthol cigarettes are wrongly perceived by many smokers to be less harmful than regular cigarettes.^{2,3} Tobacco companies also have a long history of marketing menthol cigarettes as a less harmful alternative for health-conscious smokers.^{12,13}

Canada was the first country in the world to implement a national ban on all flavours in cigarettes, some little cigars, and blunt wraps (except menthol) in July 2010.¹⁴ Nova Scotia was the first jurisdiction in the world to implement a ban on menthol cigarettes on May 31, 2015. Six provinces subsequently implemented legislation to ban menthol cigarettes: Alberta (September 31, 2015), New Brunswick (January 1, 2016), Quebec (August 26, 2016), Ontario (January 1, 2017), Prince Edward Island (May 1, 2017), and Newfoundland and Labrador (July 1, 2017).¹⁵ A national ban on the use of flavours, including menthol, mint, or spearmint (and all analogues and derivatives) in the manufacture and sale of cigarettes, little cigars, most other cigars (except those that weigh more than six grams and meet other specified criteria), and blunt wraps came into force in October 2017¹⁶, and was extended to all tobacco products in November 2018.¹⁷

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Outside of Canada, national bans on menthol cigarettes have been implemented in: Ethiopia (September 2015), Senegal (May 2017), Uganda (September 2019), Nigeria (April 2020), Moldova (May 2020), Turkey (May 2020), the United Kingdom (May 2020), and the 27 member states of the European Union (EU; May 2020).¹⁸ In March 2012, Brazil banned menthol and all other flavour additives in cigarettes, but the regulation has not been implemented due to ongoing tobacco industry legal challenges.¹⁹ In April 2021, the United States Food and Drug Administration (US FDA) announced that they will work towards the development of product standards to ban menthol in cigarettes.²⁰

In Canada, current federal regulations do not restrict the use of flavour additives (other than menthol and cloves) in a number of non-cigarette tobacco products, including large cigars (that weigh more than six grams and meet other specified criteria), traditional pipe tobacco, waterpipe tobacco, smokeless tobacco, or roll-your-own tobacco. Three provinces and one territory have implemented comprehensive bans on flavours in all tobacco products: Quebec (November 26, 2016)²¹, New Brunswick (January 1, 2016)²², Prince Edward Island (May 1, 2017)²³, and Yukon (March 5, 2020).²⁴ Four provinces and one territory have implemented bans on flavours with exemptions for some categories of tobacco products: Nova Scotia (May 31, 2015)²⁵, Alberta (September 31, 2015)²⁶, Ontario (January 1, 2017)²⁷, Newfoundland and Labrador (July 1, 2017)²⁸, and Northwest Territories (March 31, 2020).²⁹ Nunavut has passed legislation to ban flavours in all tobacco products that is not yet in force.³⁰

Flavour restrictions in vaping products

Vaping products are usually available in a wide variety of flavours in most countries where the legal sale of these products is permitted. A study of online e-cigarette brands found that 15,000+ distinct flavours were sold by English-language websites in 2016-2017³¹, which was more than double the 7,000+ unique flavours identified in 2013-2014.³² Flavoured vaping products are highly popular among youth and young adult vapers, and the availability of appealing flavours (especially fruit, candy, dessert, and menthol/mint) is often reported as one of the top reasons for experimentation with and continuation of vaping among both of these age groups.^{33,34,35} In Canada, a 2020-2021 study found that 92% of vapers aged 16 to 24 years in 10 provinces used flavoured vaping products at initiation, and 90% were current users of flavoured vaping products — with berry, mango, and mint/menthol as the most commonly reported flavours among vapers in most provinces.³⁶ The availability of flavours such as fruit, candy, sweets, and mint/menthol is also commonly cited as a reason for vaping initiation and satisfaction among adult vapers.^{37,38,39,40} Public health agencies and advocacy groups in countries such as US and Canada have raised concerns about access to vaping products in a wide variety of flavours leading to increases in youth vaping.^{41,42,43,44}

Citing the need to protect youth, especially non-smoking youth, from inducements to use vaping products, several Canadian provinces and territories have implemented restrictions on flavours in vaping products. Three provinces have regulations to restrict the sale of non-tobacco flavoured vaping products: Nova Scotia (April 2020)⁴⁶, Prince Edward Island (March 2021),²³ and New Brunswick (September 2021).²² The territory of Nunavut adopted legislation to restrict the sale of non-tobacco flavoured vaping products in June 2021, but the law has not yet been proclaimed.³⁰ Three provinces have regulations to restrict the sale of non-tobacco flavoured e-cigarettes to adults-only specialty vape shops: Ontario (July 2020, with exemption for mint and menthol flavour)⁴⁷, British Columbia (September 2020)⁴⁸, and Saskatchewan (September 2021, with exemption for menthol flavour).⁴⁹

In Canada, the federal flavour ban does not cover vaping products, which are not classified as tobacco products. Health Canada has proposed new regulations to restrict flavours in vaping products to tobacco and mint/menthol.⁴⁵ A public consultation to gather feedback on this regulatory proposal was conducted from June 18, 2021 to September 2, 2021.

Some jurisdictions in the US and the EU have also implemented e-cigarette flavour restrictions. In the US, restrictions on the sale of all non-tobacco flavoured e-cigarettes have been implemented in four states: Massachusetts (November 27, 2019), New Jersey (April 20, 2020), New York (May 18, 2020), and Rhode Island (March 26, 2020).⁵⁰ California passed legislation to prohibit the sale of non-tobacco flavoured e-cigarettes on August 28, 2020, with implementation suspended pending a referendum vote in November 2022.^{51,52} In February 2020, the US FDA finalized an enforcement policy on the manufacture, distribution, and sale of unauthorized flavoured cartridge- or pod-based e-cigarettes, except for menthol and tobacco flavours.⁵³ In the EU, a restriction on the sale of non-tobacco flavoured e-liquids has been implemented in Finland (January 1, 2017)⁵⁴; and restrictions on the sale of all non-tobacco flavoured e-cigarettes and e-liquids has been implemented in Hungary (August 16, 2016)⁵⁵, and Estonia (May 29, 2020, with exemption for menthol flavour)⁵⁶, and is scheduled to come into force in Denmark (April 1, 2022, with exemption for menthol flavour)⁵⁷, the Netherlands (July 1, 2022),⁵⁸ Lithuania (July 1, 2022)⁸⁷, and Ukraine (July 2023).⁸⁸

The following sections present national-level 2020 ITC Smoking and Vaping Survey findings on behavioural responses to Canada's 2017 national menthol ban, and perceptions of the harmfulness of menthol cigarettes relative to non-menthol cigarettes among adult smokers in Canada. Findings on the use of flavoured vaping products, and anticipated behavioural responses to a proposed restriction on flavoured vaping products among adult vapers in Canada are also presented. Data for selected measures from Canada are also compared with ITC data from Australia, England, and the US.

IMPACT OF CANADA'S MENTHOL CIGARETTE BAN ON SMOKING BEHAVIOURS

Canada is the first country where a menthol ban has been evaluated. Studies have demonstrated that the menthol cigarette ban in Ontario led to substantial public health benefits. Following Ontario's ban on menthol cigarettes, a larger proportion of menthol smokers made a quit attempt compared to those who said they would do so pre-ban⁵⁹, and there was a significant increase in quit attempts and quit success among menthol smokers compared to non-menthol smokers.^{10,60} Consistent with these findings from Ontario, an ITC study¹¹ that evaluated the impact of menthol cigarette bans in seven Canadian provinces between 2016 (pre-ban) and 2018 (post-ban) found that:

- Baseline menthol smokers were significantly more likely than baseline non-menthol smokers to have made a quit attempt (58.7% vs 49.0%), and those who had quit prior to the ban were more likely to have remained quit (12.1% vs 5.9%) at follow-up.
- Among baseline daily smokers, daily menthol smokers were significantly more likely than daily non-menthol smokers to have made a quit attempt (58.8% vs 47.0%), to have quit smoking (21.0% vs 11.6%), and those who had quit prior to the ban were more likely to have remained quit (12.7% vs 5.2%) at follow-up.

Studies have also found a significant reduction in menthol cigarette sales and total cigarette sales, after menthol cigarettes were banned across ten Canadian provinces⁶¹, and in the province of Ontario.⁶²

Pre-ban menthol smokers' self-reported responses to Canada's 2017 national menthol cigarette ban: ITC findings among post-ban smokers in 2020

To examine patterns of smoking and vaping approximately 2.5 years after the implementation of the 2017 national menthol cigarette ban, the 2020 ITC Canada Survey asked all current smokers:

“Canada banned menthol in cigarettes in October, 2017. Were you smoking menthol cigarettes before the ban came into effect?”

Smokers who reported use of menthol cigarettes prior to the ban were then asked:

“What did you do when menthol cigarettes were banned?”

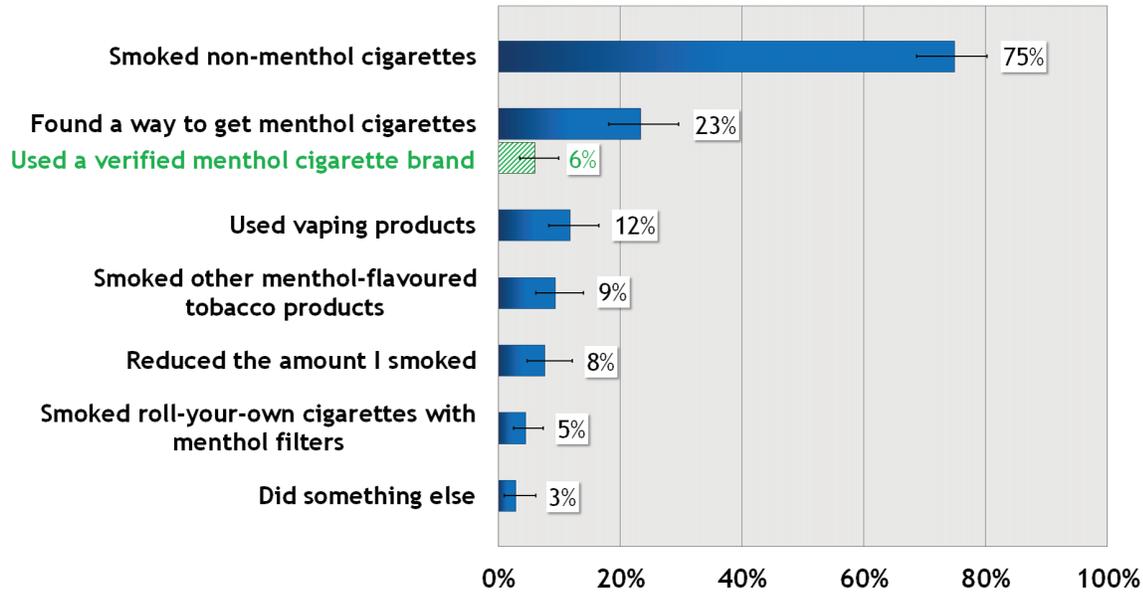
It should be noted that the wording of the latter survey question does not provide information on the timeframe for respondents' self-reported behavioural responses in relation to the timing of the menthol ban. As such, respondents were categorized as current menthol smokers and non-menthol smokers based on validation of the cigarette brand name they reported as their regular brand in 2020.

In 2020, 21% (n=356) of all current smokers reported that they had used menthol cigarettes prior to the 2017 national menthol ban. Among current smokers who said that they used menthol cigarettes prior to the 2017 ban and responded to the survey questions asking what they did in response to the ban (n=351; n=5 did not provide responses), 75% said they switched to non-menthol cigarettes, and 23% (n=88) said they found a way to get menthol cigarettes after the ban. Less than 1 in 8 pre-ban menthol smokers switched to other products after the ban, including vaping products (12%), other smoked menthol-flavoured tobacco products (9%), or roll-your-own cigarettes with menthol filters (5%). Eight percent (8%) said that they reduced smoking, and 3% said they did something else (see Figure 1). **It should be noted that the percentage of pre-ban menthol smokers who said that they had quit smoking in 2020 (after the 2017 menthol ban) is not reported here. A forthcoming scientific paper will present longitudinal findings from the ITC 2016-2020 Surveys on the impact of Canada's menthol ban on smoking cessation.**

Of the 88 smokers who said they found a way to get menthol cigarettes after the ban, 45% were residents of Ontario, 21% from Quebec, 15% from British Columbia, 10% from the Prairie region, 9% from Alberta, and 1% from the Atlantic region.ⁱ Coding of cigarette brand names reported by those smokers who said they found a way to get menthol cigarettes after the ban showed that 18 reported a verified menthol cigarette brand as their regular brand in 2020.

This means that only 6% (18 of 356) of the pre-ban menthol smokers were regularly smoking illicit menthol cigarettes after the ban. Among these 18 post-ban regular menthol smokers, the most commonly reported location of their last purchase of menthol cigarettes was First Nations reserves (60%), followed by convenience stores (20%), supermarkets (17%), discount tobacco outlets (1%), and bars/pubs (1%). Most of these post-ban regular menthol smokers were residents of Ontario (52%), followed by Quebec (24%), the Prairie region (13%), British Columbia (8%), and the Atlantic region (2%), with none from Alberta.ⁱⁱ

Figure 1. Current smokers' self-reported responses to Canada's 2017 menthol cigarette ban among pre-ban menthol smokers* in 2020



*Among at least monthly smokers who smoked menthol cigarettes before the 2017 ban, and were still smoking after the ban in 2020. Note that Figure 1 in this report does not include the percentage of pre-ban menthol smokers who reported that they had quit smoking in 2020 (after the 2017 menthol ban). A forthcoming scientific paper will present longitudinal findings from the ITC 2016-2020 Surveys on the impact of Canada's menthol ban on smoking cessation.

An ITC study that evaluated the impact of menthol cigarette bans in seven Canadian provinces between 2016 (pre-ban) and 2018 (post-ban) reported a similar pattern of findings.¹¹ The study found that 59.1% of menthol smokers switched to non-menthol cigarettes, 21.5% said they had quit smoking, and 19.5% said that they continued to smoke menthol cigarettes at follow-up. However, of the 38 pre-ban menthol smokers who said they still smoked menthol cigarettes in 2018, less than 10% (13 of 138) were smoking a verified menthol cigarette brand.

Overall, ITC findings suggest that menthol smokers who continued to smoke after menthol cigarette bans were most likely switch to non-menthol cigarettes. These results may be related in large part to the high addictiveness of nicotine in cigarettes, in addition to a range of psychological, social, and environmental factors.

Although banning menthol cigarettes may lead menthol smokers to switch to non-menthol cigarettes, there is evidence that a menthol ban may also help smokers to quit. For example, menthol cigarette bans in Canada significantly increased quit attempts and quit success among menthol smokers compared to non-menthol smokers, and significantly reduced smoking relapse among menthol smokers who had quit prior to the ban.¹¹ A study of US smokers also found that switching from menthol to non-menthol cigarettes (vs maintaining menthol use) significantly increased both short-term (30+ day) and long-term (12 month) smoking cessation, while switching from non-menthol to menthol cigarettes (vs maintaining non-menthol use) significantly decreased cessation success.⁶³ These findings suggest that banning menthol cigarettes may improve cessation among menthol smokers, including those who switch to non-menthol cigarettes. Future ITC studies will examine the long-term impact of Canada's menthol ban on smoking cessation, and transitions to alternative tobacco products and nicotine vaping products.

ⁱ Weighted estimates for smokers who said they found a way to get menthol cigarettes in 2020 by province do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

ⁱⁱ Weighted estimates for smokers who reported a verified menthol cigarette brand as their regular brand in 2020 by province do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

PERCEIVED HARMFULNESS OF MENTHOL CIGARETTES RELATIVE TO NON-MENTHOL CIGARETTES

Menthol cigarettes are marketed by tobacco companies as “safer” and “smoother” than regular cigarettes. Menthol in cigarettes creates a cooling sensation that makes cigarette smoke feel less harsh when inhaled by the user. This, in turn, may lead consumers to incorrectly believe that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than non-menthol cigarettes.^{12, 64}, and reduce the likelihood of cessation behaviours among menthol smokers.²

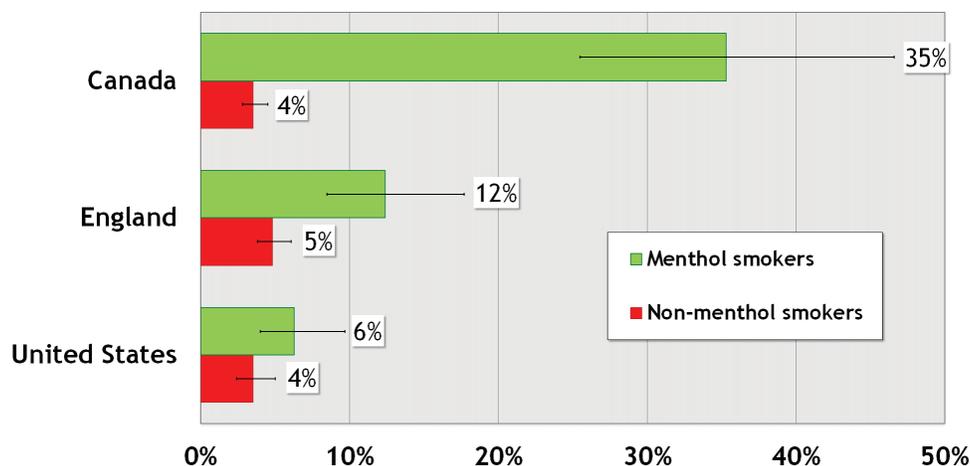
The 2020 ITC Survey asked smokers whether they agreed or disagreed that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than non-menthol cigarettes. Smokers were asked to identify the flavour of their usual brand, and those who used “tobacco and menthol” flavour were categorized as menthol smokers (Canada: n=141; England: n=419; US: n=558), while those who used “just tobacco” or “tobacco and some other flavour” were categorized as non-menthol smokers (Canada: n=2149; England: n=2220; US: n=984).

In Canada and England, all forms of tobacco product promotion that are false, misleading, or deceptive are prohibited,^{65, 66} and plain packaging (also known as standardized packaging) is required for cigarettes.^{67, 68} Both of these countries also have national menthol cigarette bans in force. In the US, false or misleading labels, labelling, and advertising for tobacco products that represents the product as less harmful than others are prohibited^{69, 70}; however, cigarette plain packaging is not required, and the federal ban on flavoured cigarettes exempts menthol.

As such, it was surprising that the percentage of menthol smokers who believed that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than non-menthol cigarettes was significantly higher in Canada (35%) – which had restrictive policies on misleading tobacco promotion and a menthol cigarette ban in effect at the time of the survey – compared to menthol smokers in England (12%; similar policies as Canada) and the US (6%; less restrictive policies). There are country differences in the use of menthol cigarettes, which has traditionally been less prevalent in Canada than in the other two countries. Prior to the 2017 national menthol cigarette ban in Canada, self-reported use of menthol cigarettes was substantially lower at 2% in 2015⁷¹, compared to 12% in 2016 for England⁶ (before 2020 national menthol ban), and 40% in 2019 for the US⁷ (no national menthol ban). However, it is unclear why there are large variations in harm perceptions between the three countries.

In all three countries, menthol smokers were more likely than non-menthol smokers to believe that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than non-menthol cigarettes, with significant differences in Canada (35% vs 4%) and England (12% vs 5%), but not in the US (6% vs 4%) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of smokers* who “strongly agree” or “agree” that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than non-menthol cigarettes, by country, 2020



*Among at least monthly smokers.

FLAVOURED VAPING PRODUCTS AND HEATED TOBACCO PRODUCTS

The following section presents findings on the use of flavoured vaping products among respondents to the 2020 ITC Smoking and Vaping Survey in Canada, Australia, England, and the US. Findings on anticipated responses to Health Canada's proposed restrictions on flavoured vaping products, and the use of flavoured heated tobacco products among respondents in Canada are also presented.

Use of flavoured vaping products

At the time of the 2020 ITC Survey, the following restrictions for flavoured vaping products were in place in each of the four countries:

- **Canada:** Provincial ban on the sale of non-tobacco flavoured e-cigarettes in Nova Scotia.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Australia:** State- and territory-level bans on the sale and use of flavoured e-liquids that contain nicotine.⁷²
- **US:** State-level bans on the sale of all non-tobacco flavoured e-cigarettes in Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and California; and an FDA enforcement policy on the manufacture, distribution, and sale of unauthorized flavoured cartridge- or pod-based e-cigarettes (except tobacco or menthol).ⁱⁱⁱ
- **England:** No bans on flavoured e-cigarettes.

The 2020 ITC Survey asked current vapers (defined as those who vaped at least weekly) in Canada, Australia, England, and the US whether they had used any of the following e-liquid flavours in the past 30 days: tobacco, mix of tobacco and menthol, menthol/mint, fruit, candy/dessert/sweets, chocolate, clove/other spice, coffee, non-alcoholic drink, alcoholic drink, unflavoured, and other. Vapers who reported use of multiple flavours were asked which flavour they used most often. Flavour categories were grouped as menthol flavour (“mix of tobacco and menthol” or “menthol/mint”), and non-menthol flavour (all other flavours).

In Canada, 79% of vapers reported using non-menthol flavoured vaping products in the past 30 days while 21% reported using menthol flavoured vaping products. There was no difference in use of menthol flavoured vaping products between dual users (currently smoke cigarettes and vape; 21%) compared to exclusive vapers (recent ex-smokers who quit within the previous two years and only vape; 22%).

There was no difference in vapers' reported use of menthol flavoured vaping products in the past 30 days in Canada (39%), compared to England (44%), the US (38%), and Australia (29%).

It is worth noting that it is unclear how vapers would identify new e-liquid flavours that include menthol along with other flavours (e.g., “icy mango”, “passionfruit ice”, “chill apple peach”) using the ITC Survey response options. It is possible that vapers may distinguish the first flavour attribute mentioned in the product brand name as the primary flavour and report that as the flavour they used most often; however, there is potential for misclassification of e-liquids that contain menthol and other flavours, and the ITC Survey does not collect data on e-liquid brand names for verification.

ⁱⁱⁱ Policy implementation dates and additional details are provided in previous section on pages 1 and 2: Flavour bans in cigarettes and non-cigarette tobacco products.

Use of flavoured vaping products for smoking cessation

Flavoured vaping products (especially fruit flavours) are popular among both youth and adults. In 2019, 42% of Canadians aged 15 years and older reported using fruit flavoured vapes most often, with highest rates of use among youth aged 15 to 19 years (51%), followed by young adults aged 20 to 24 years (48%), and adults aged 25 years and older (35%).⁷³ Smoking cessation was the most common reason for vaping among adults aged 25 years and older (41% in 2019, 53% in 2020).⁷⁴

There is considerable debate on how to regulate flavoured vaping products in order to prevent vaping initiation among youth while providing options for adult smokers who want to use these products for smoking cessation. While there is strong evidence that vaping is positively associated with the initiation of cigarette smoking among youth⁷⁵, it remains unclear whether this association is different for youth who use flavoured versus unflavoured vaping products.

A longitudinal population-based US study found that new uptake of vaping was associated with: (1) increased smoking initiation among youth (aged 12 to 17 years) and emerging adults (aged 18 to 24 years) at follow-up, and (2) increased cessation among prime-age adults (aged 25 to 54 years) who smoked at baseline. Results also showed that use of flavoured e-cigarettes was not associated with greater youth smoking initiation, but was associated with greater adult smoking cessation. The authors noted that these associations were not causal, and that some participants who began vaping may have started smoking even without e-cigarettes, and that some participants who replaced cigarettes with vaping may have quit even without e-cigarettes.⁷⁶ A few longitudinal cohort studies have found that adult smokers who used flavoured vapes were more likely to quit smoking compared to those who used tobacco/unflavoured vapes, which is suggestive but not conclusive of a possible link between the use of flavoured vaping products and cessation.^{76,77}

The ITC Canada Survey asked current smokers and recent ex-smokers (quit ≤ 2 years) which e-liquid flavour category they used most for their last/current quit attempt. It should be noted that the ITC Canada Survey does not collect data from respondents who have never smoked or used e-cigarettes, and we are therefore unable to report results for use of flavoured vaping products among never-smokers.

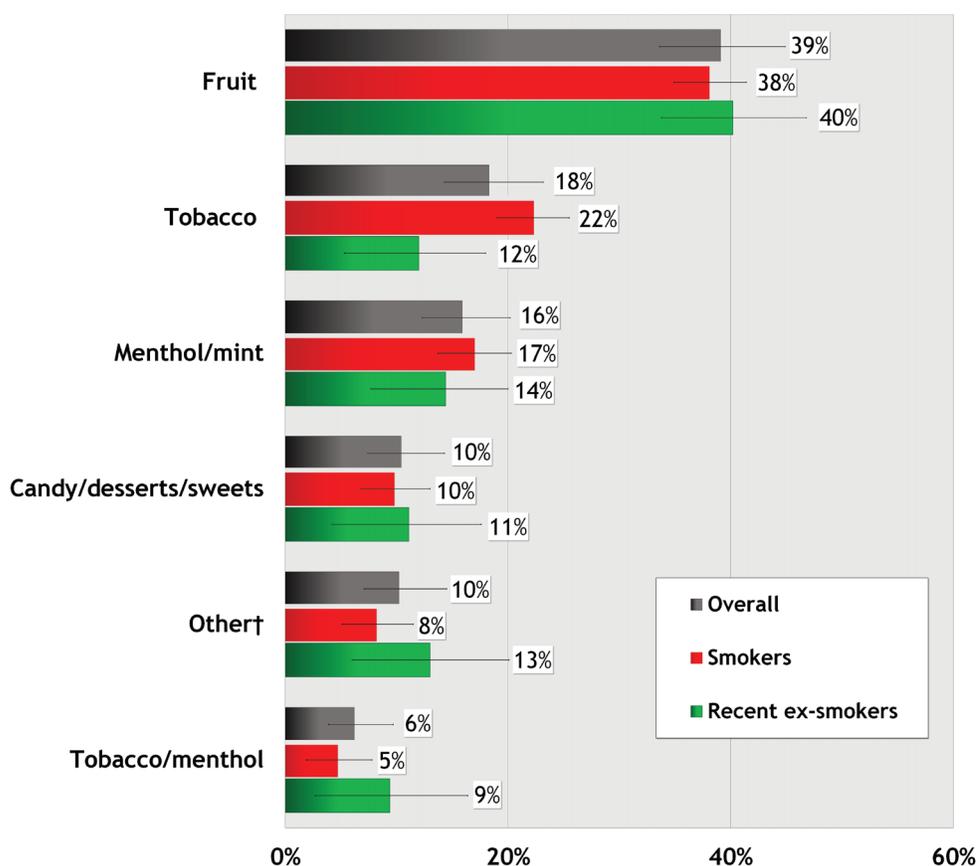
Overall, the most common flavour used by Canadian smokers for a quit attempt was fruit (39%), followed by tobacco (18%), menthol/mint (16%), candy/desserts/sweets (10%), other^{iv} (10%), and mix of tobacco and menthol (6%) (see Figure 3).

There was no difference in the use of different flavours for a quit attempt between smokers and recent ex-smokers: fruit (38% smokers vs 40% ex-smokers), menthol/mint (17% smokers vs 14% ex-smokers), candy/desserts/sweets (10% smokers vs 11% ex-smokers), other (8% smokers vs 13% ex-smokers), and mix of tobacco and menthol (5% smokers vs 9% ex-smokers). Smokers were significantly more likely to use tobacco flavoured vaping products for a quit attempt compared to recent ex-smokers (22% vs 12%) (see Figure 3).

There is considerable debate on how to regulate flavoured vaping products in order to prevent vaping initiation among youth while providing options for adult smokers who want to use these products for smoking cessation. The most common e-liquid flavour used by Canadian smokers and recent ex-smokers for a quit attempt was fruit (39%), followed by tobacco (18%), menthol/mint (16%), candy/desserts/sweets (10%), other (10%) and mix of tobacco and menthol (6%).

^{iv} This category includes the following flavours: chocolate, clove/other spice, coffee, non-alcoholic drink, alcoholic drink, and unflavoured.

Figure 3. E-liquid flavour most used for last/current quit attempt among Canadian smokers* and recent ex-smokers*, 2020

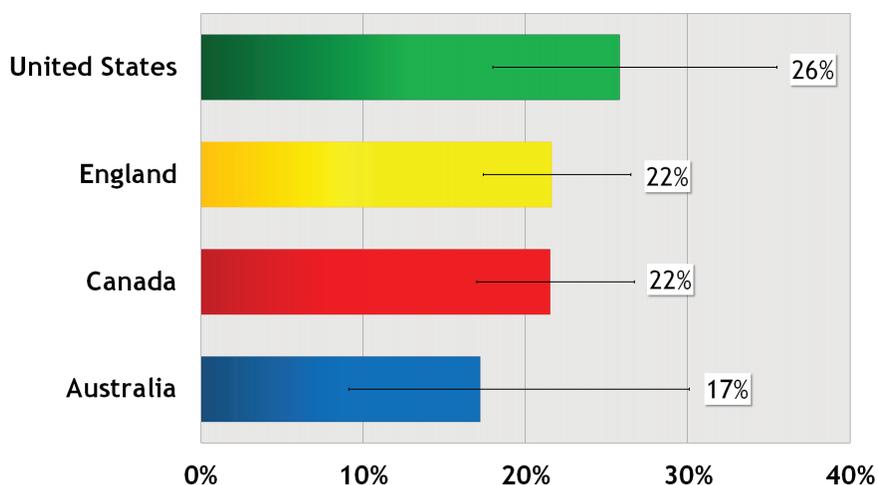


*Smokers are those who currently smoke cigarettes at least monthly and used vaping products for their last quit attempt. Recent ex-smokers are cigarette smokers who quit smoking in the last two years and used vaping products for their current quit attempt.

†Other flavours include chocolate, clove/other spice, coffee, non-alcoholic drink, alcoholic drink, and unflavoured.

The percentage of smokers in Canada (22%) who reported use of menthol/mint flavoured vaping products for a quit attempt was comparable to smokers in the US (26%), England (22%), and Australia (17%) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage of smokers* who reported menthol/mint as most used e-liquid flavour for their last quit attempt, by country, 2020



*Smokers are those who currently smoke cigarettes at least monthly and used vaping products for their last quit attempt.

Anticipated responses to proposed national restrictions on flavours in vaping products among Canadian vapers

At this time, restrictions on flavours in vaping products have been implemented by some jurisdictions in Canada, the US, and the EU. As such, few studies have evaluated the impact of vaping flavour restrictions to date. In order to fill this evidence gap, researchers have asked individual vapers to report on what they might do in response to a future ban on flavours in vaping products.^{78,79} It is important to note that anticipated behavioural responses to hypothetical bans may not translate to actual behaviour. However, hypothetical scenario studies can still provide valuable information in this emerging research area, and there is some evidence that behavioural prediction tasks of hypothetical policy changes may predict actual behaviour.⁸⁰

The following section presents findings on vapers' anticipated responses to Health Canada's regulatory proposal to restrict flavours in vaping products, with exemption for tobacco or mint/menthol flavours. Vapers were classified as "permitted flavour vapers" and "restricted flavour vapers". Permitted flavour vapers were defined as at least weekly vapers who reported use of flavours that would be permitted by the proposed vaping product flavour regulations in the past 30 days (i.e., tobacco flavour, mint/menthol flavour, or unflavoured). Restricted flavour vapers were defined as at least weekly vapers who reported use of flavours that would be prohibited by the proposed flavour regulations in the past 30 days (i.e., all non-tobacco or non-mint/menthol flavours).

The 2020 ITC Survey asked Canadian vapers:

"If fruit, candy, and other flavours were banned in vaping products and e-liquid, and only tobacco and menthol flavours would be available, what would you do?"

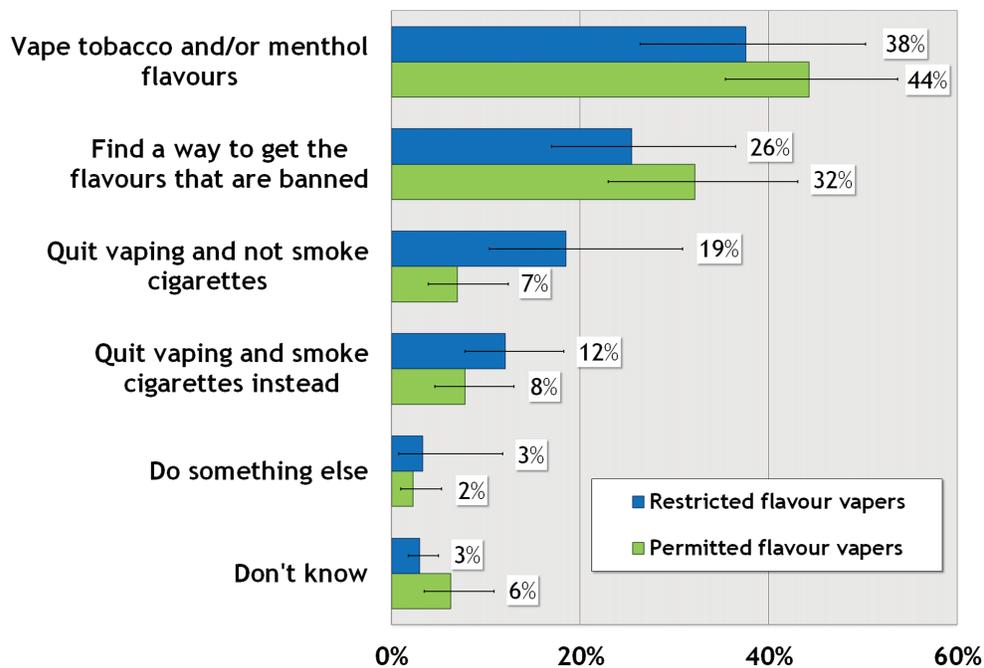
Among permitted flavour vapers (n=373), the most common responses were that they would vape the permitted tobacco and menthol flavours (44%), or find a way to get banned flavours (32%), followed by quit vaping and smoke cigarettes instead (8%), quit vaping and not smoke cigarettes (7%), don't know (6%), and do something else (2%) (see Figure 5).

Among restricted flavour vapers (n=227), the most common responses were that they would vape the permitted tobacco and menthol flavours (38%), or find a way to get banned flavours (26%), followed by quit vaping and not smoke cigarettes (19%), quit vaping and smoke cigarettes instead (12%), do something else (3%), or don't know (3%) (see Figure 5).

Overall, vapers who use the restricted flavours were significantly more likely to report that they would quit vaping and not smoke cigarettes if all flavours except tobacco and menthol were banned in vaping products, compared to vapers who use permitted flavours (19% vs 7%). There was no difference between vapers who use restricted flavours and those who use permitted flavours for all other responses to the proposed flavour restriction.

If Health Canada's proposed regulations to restrict flavours in vaping products (except tobacco or mint/menthol) were implemented, most vapers said that they would switch to permitted tobacco and/or menthol flavours or find a way to get restricted flavours. Vapers who use restricted flavours were more likely to say that they would quit vaping and not smoke cigarettes compared to vapers who use permitted (tobacco and menthol) flavours.

Figure 5. Anticipated responses to Health Canada’s proposed restriction on flavours in vaping products (with exemption for tobacco and mint/menthol) among vapers*, 2020



*Among ‘permitted flavour vapers’ who reported at least weekly use of tobacco, mint/menthol, or unflavoured e-liquids in the past 30 days; and ‘restricted flavour vapers’ who reported at least weekly use of any non-tobacco or non-menthol flavoured e-liquids in the past 30 days.

Use of flavoured heated tobacco products

Tobacco companies have recently introduced a new generation of heated tobacco products (HTPs) onto the marketplace, with IQOS (Philip Morris International) as the most widely known brand that was launched in Canada in 2017.⁸¹ HTPs are electronic devices that heat tobacco (loose-leaf, sticks, plugs, or capsules) to produce a nicotine-infused aerosol that is often flavoured for oral inhalation.⁸² Tobacco companies refer to HTPs as “reduced-risk” tobacco products, although there remains considerable debate about how harmful they are in comparison to cigarettes or vaping products.⁸³

While HTPs are still relatively new on the Canadian market, there is evidence for consumer awareness and use of these products. An ITC study found that 6% of Canadian youth aged 16 to 19 years were aware of IQOS in 2017, and 33% said that they were interested in trying the product.⁸⁴ In 2019, 42% of Canadian regular vapers (vaped at least once a week for the past 30 days) aged 15 years and older reported awareness of HTPs, and 17% had ever used them.⁸⁵

In Canada, HTPs are regulated as tobacco products under the 2018 TVPA¹⁹, in accordance with WHO recommendations.⁸⁶ Federal regulations that prohibit the use of all flavours (including menthol) in the manufacture and sale of tobacco products, including HTPs, came into force in November 2018. IQOS HeatSticks in Canada are available in a range of robust to mellow tobacco flavour blends including “Sequoia”, “Teak”, “Elm”, “Oak”, “Cypress”, and “Birch”.

The 2020 ITC Canada Survey asked HTP users (defined as those who reported at least monthly use of HTPs; n=444) what flavour they usually use or last used.

In 2020, 45% of HTP users in Canada reported using tobacco flavour, 41% used tobacco and menthol flavour, and 14% used tobacco and some other flavour. It is unclear how HTP users were able to access menthol flavoured HTPs that were banned in 2018.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Majority of Canadian smokers who said that they used menthol cigarettes before the 2017 national menthol ban switched to non-menthol cigarettes after the ban.

- In 2020, 21% (n=356) of all current smokers reported that they had used menthol cigarettes prior to the 2017 menthol ban.
- Among smokers who said that they smoked menthol cigarettes before the 2017 menthol ban, were still smoking in 2020 (after ban), and responded to survey questions asking what they did in response to the ban (n=351):
 - 75% (n=244) said they switched to non-menthol cigarettes in 2020.
 - 23% (n=88) said they found a way to get menthol cigarettes after the ban; however, verification of the cigarette brand name reported as their regular brand showed that only 6% (n=18) were regularly using illicit menthol cigarettes in 2020, which represents 1.4% of all current smokers, with 60% reporting purchasing them from First Nations reserves.

1 in 3 Canadian menthol smokers incorrectly believe that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than non-menthol smokers.

- 35% of menthol smokers in Canada believed that menthol cigarettes are less harmful than non-menthol cigarettes, which was significantly higher in comparison with menthol smokers in England (12%) and the US (6%).

Canadian adult vapers are more likely to use non-menthol flavoured than menthol flavoured vaping products.

- 79% of Canadian vapers reported past 30-day use of non-menthol flavoured (tobacco or any other non-menthol flavour) vaping products.
- 21% of Canadian vapers reported past 30-day use of menthol flavoured (mix of tobacco and menthol, or menthol/mint flavour) vaping products, with no differences between dual users (21%) and exclusive vapers (22%).

Fruit is the most popular e-liquid flavour used for a quit attempt among Canadian smokers.

- Among Canadian smokers who reported using vaping products for their last quit attempt, 39% said they used fruit flavoured e-liquid for their last quit attempt, followed by tobacco (18%), menthol/mint (16%), candy/desserts/sweets (10%), other (10%), and mix of tobacco and menthol (6%).
- While there was no difference in the use of different e-liquid flavour categories for a quit attempt between Canadian smokers and recent ex-smokers, Canadian smokers were significantly more likely to use tobacco flavour for a quit attempt than recent ex-smokers.
- There was no difference in the use of menthol flavoured e-liquids for quit attempts between smokers in Canada (22%), the US (26%), England (22%), and Australia (17%).

If Health Canada's proposed regulations to restrict flavours in vaping products (except tobacco or mint/menthol) were implemented, most vapers said that they would switch to permitted tobacco and/or menthol flavours or find a way to get restricted flavours. Vapers who use permitted flavours were less likely to say that they would quit vaping without smoking cigarettes compared to vapers who use restricted flavours.

- Among Canadian vapers, the most common predicted response to proposed regulations to restrict flavours in vaping products (except for tobacco or mint/menthol flavours) was that they would switch to vaping permitted tobacco and/or menthol flavours (38% restricted flavour vapers, 44% permitted flavour vapers), followed by finding a way to get banned flavours (26% restricted flavour vapers, 32% permitted flavour vapers).
- If all flavours (except tobacco or menthol) were restricted in vaping products, Canadian vapers who use non-tobacco or non-mint/menthol flavours that would be restricted were significantly more likely to report that they would quit vaping and not smoke cigarettes, compared to vapers who use tobacco or mint/menthol flavours that would be permitted (19% vs 7%). There was no significant difference between restricted flavour vapers and permitted flavour vapers who said that they would quit vaping and smoke cigarettes in response to such a flavour restriction (12% vs 8%).
- Less than 7% of Canadian vapers said they would do something else, or did not know what they would do if all flavours (except tobacco and menthol) were restricted in vaping products.

2 in 5 Canadians who use heated tobacco products use tobacco or tobacco and menthol flavoured products.

- Among Canadian heated tobacco users, 45% said that they used tobacco flavour and 41% used tobacco and menthol flavour, while 14% used tobacco and some other flavour.

CONCLUSION

This report presents findings from the ITC Canada 2020 Survey on the use of flavoured nicotine products, and behavioural responses to actual and potential restrictions on flavours in these products among adult smokers, vapers, and heated tobacco product users.

Canada was the first country in the world to implement a national ban on all flavours (except menthol) in cigarettes, some little cigars, and blunt wraps in July 2010. The province of Nova Scotia banned menthol cigarettes in May 2015, with similar bans implemented in Alberta, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador between September 2015 and July 2017. A national ban on the use of menthol in cigarettes, little cigars, most other cigars, and blunt wraps came into effect in October 2017. As of November 2018, Canada prohibits flavours, including menthol, in all tobacco products. In June 2021, Health Canada proposed new regulations to restrict flavours in vaping products to tobacco and mint/menthol.

ITC Survey findings showed that a majority (75%) of current smokers who reported smoking menthol cigarettes prior to the 2017 menthol ban said that they switched to non-menthol cigarettes in 2020; however, fewer than 1 in 10 (6%) were using illicit menthol cigarettes, with First Nations reserves being the most common venue for purchasing menthol cigarettes.

There is strong evidence that menthol bans in Canada have helped smokers to quit. Consistent with other data reported from Ontario, a published ITC study (data collected between 2016 and 2018) found that after the implementation of menthol cigarette bans across seven Canadian provinces, menthol smokers were significantly more likely than non-menthol smokers to have made a quit attempt, and to have quit smoking successfully. In addition, menthol smokers who had quit before the ban were more likely than non-menthol smokers to have remained quit. The ITC Project is continuing to follow up this cohort of smokers over three years (2016 to 2020) to examine the long-term impact of the Canada's menthol cigarette ban on smoking cessation and use of alternative nicotine products.

Flavoured vaping products (especially fruit flavours) are popular among both youth and adults. ITC Survey findings showed that about 4 in 5 adult vapers reported using non-menthol flavours, compared to 1 in 5 who reported using menthol flavours in 2020. Fruit flavoured e-liquid was most commonly used among smokers and recent ex-smokers for a quit attempt, followed by tobacco, menthol/mint, candy/desserts/sweets, other, and mix of tobacco and menthol.

About 2 in 5 adult vapers said that if flavours in vaping products were restricted to only tobacco or mint/menthol flavours, they would vape these permitted flavours. Vapers who use flavours other than tobacco or mint/menthol that would be restricted were more likely to report that they would quit vaping and not smoke cigarettes (1 in 5) compared to those who vape tobacco or mint/menthol flavours that would be permitted (less than 1 in 10). About 1 in 10 vapers reported that they would quit vaping and smoke cigarettes instead.

It is currently unknown whether Canada's proposed regulations to restrict flavours in vaping products to tobacco and mint/menthol will achieve the intended goal of making vaping products less appealing to youth in order to help curb youth vaping, while providing flavour options for adult smokers who have transitioned or wish to transition away from smoking to vaping as a less harmful source of nicotine. Further studies to evaluate the impact of actual vaping flavour restrictions on smoking cessation, and trajectories of product use among both youth and adults will be important to inform policy development.

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For further information, please contact:

Dr. Geoffrey T. Fong, ITC Project Founder and Principal Investigator
Department of Psychology,

University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1

Email: gfont@uwaterloo.ca www.itcproject.org