

Prevalence, perceptions, and factors associated with menthol cigarette smoking: Findings from the ITC Kenya and Zambia Surveys

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Abstract

Background: Menthol masks the harshness of cigarette smoke, promotes youth smoking and encourages health-concerned smokers who incorrectly believe that menthols are less harmful to smoke menthols. This study of smokers in Kenya and Zambia is the first study in Africa to examine menthol use, smokers' beliefs about its harmfulness and the factors associated with menthols.

Methods: Data were from the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Kenya Wave 2 (2018) and Zambia Wave 2 Survey (2014), involving nationally representative samples of smokers. This study focuses on 1246 adult smokers (644 in Kenya, 602 in Zambia) who reported smoking a usual brand of cigarettes (menthol or non-menthol).

Results: Overall, menthol use was significantly higher among smokers in Zambia than in Kenya (48.0% vs 19.0%), females (45.6% vs 31.2% males), non-daily smokers (43.8% vs 30.0% daily) and those who exclusively smoked factory-made (FM) cigarettes (43.0% vs 15.2%). The erroneous belief that menthols are less harmful was more likely among smokers in Zambia than in Kenya (53.4% vs 29.3%) and among female smokers (38.5% vs 28.2%). In Kenya, menthol smoking was associated with being female (adjusted odds ratios (AOR)=3.07; $p=0.03$), worrying about future health (AOR=2.28; $p=0.02$) and disagreeing with the statement that smoking was calming (AOR=2.05; $p=0.04$). In Zambia, menthol use was associated with being female (AOR=3.91; $p=0.002$), completing primary school (AOR=2.14; $p=0.03$), being a non-daily smoker (AOR=2.29; $p=0.03$), exclusively using FM cigarettes (AOR=14.7; $p<0.001$), having a past quit attempt (AOR=1.54; $p=0.02$), believing that menthols are less harmful (AOR=3.80; $p<0.001$) and choosing menthols because they believed it was less harmful (AOR=3.52; $p<0.001$).

Conclusions: Menthols are highly prevalent among females in both countries. There is a need in African countries to combat the myth that menthols are less harmful and to ban menthol and other flavourings.

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