

Beyond light and mild: cigarette brand descriptors and perceptions of risk in the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four Country Survey

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Abstract

Aims To examine perceptions of risk related to type of cigarette brand.

Design and setting Cross-sectional findings from wave 5 of the ITC Four Country Survey, conducted with nationally representative samples of smokers in 2006.

Participants A total of 8243 current and former adult (≥ 18 years) smokers from Canada ($n = 2022$), the United States ($n = 2034$), the United Kingdom ($n = 2019$) and Australia ($n = 2168$).

Measurements Outcomes included beliefs about the relative risks of cigarettes, including perceptions of 'own' brand. Correlates included sociodemographic, smoking-related covariates and brand characteristics.

Findings One-fifth of smokers believed incorrectly that 'some cigarette brands could be less harmful' than others. False beliefs were higher in both the United States and United Kingdom compared to Canada and Australia. Smokers of 'light/mild', 'slim' and 100 mm/120 mm cigarettes were more likely to believe that some cigarettes could be less harmful [odds ratio (OR) = 1.29, 95% confidence interval (CI) = 1.12–1.48] and that their own brand might be a little less harmful (OR = 2.61, 95% CI = 2.01–3.41). Smokers of 'gold', 'silver', 'blue' or 'purple' brands were more likely to believe that their 'own brand might be a little less harmful' compared to smokers of 'red' or 'black' brands (OR = 12.48, 95% CI = 1.45–107.31).

Conclusions Despite current prohibitions on the words 'light' and 'mild', smokers in western countries continue to falsely believe that some cigarette brands may be less harmful than others. These beliefs are associated with descriptive words and elements of package design that have yet to be prohibited, including the names of colours and long, slim cigarettes.

Keywords Brand descriptors, health policy, packaging, perceptions of risk, smoking, tobacco.

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