

US smokers' beliefs, experiences and perceptions of different cigarette variants before and after the FSPTCA ban on misleading descriptors such as 'light', 'mild', or 'low'

Yong, H.H., Borland, R., Cummings, K.M., Lindblom, E., Li, L., Bansal-Travers, M., O'Connor, R.J., Elton-Marshall, T., Thrasher, J.F., Hammond, D., Thompson, M.E., & Partos, T.R.

Abstract

INTRODUCTION: In December 2008, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) took action that prompted the removal of nicotine and tar listings from cigarette packs and ads. As of June 2010, the U.S. Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act prohibited the use of explicit or implicit descriptors on tobacco packaging or in advertising that convey messages of reduced risk or exposure, specifically including terms like 'light', 'mild' and 'low' and similar descriptors. This study evaluates the effect of these two policy changes on smokers' beliefs, experiences and perceptions of different cigarettes.

METHODS: Using generalized estimating equations models, this study analysed survey data collected between 2002 and 2013 by the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Study regarding U.S. smokers' beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of different cigarettes.

RESULTS: Between 2002 and 2013, smoker misperceptions about 'light' cigarettes being less harmful did not change significantly and remained substantial, especially among those who reported using lower-strength cigarettes. After the two policy changes, reported reliance on pack colours, colour terms, and other product descriptors like 'smooth' to determine cigarette strength style trended upward.

CONCLUSIONS: Policies implemented to reduce smoker misperceptions that some cigarettes are safer than others appear to have had little impact. Because of pack colours, colour terms, descriptors such as "smooth," cigarette taste or feel, and possibly other characteristics, millions of smokers continue to believe, inaccurately, that they can reduce their harms and risks by smoking one cigarette brand or sub-brand instead of another, which may be delaying or reducing smoking cessation.

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