



Diseases A - Z

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Tobacco Use and African Americans

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Overall, 22 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks smoke compared with 24 percent of non-Hispanic Whites. Since 1950, African-American men have had considerably higher rates of cigarette smoking than White males. Yet in recent years, smoking prevalence among African-American men has been similar to that among White men. In 2002, 27.1 percent of non-Hispanic Black men smoked, compared with 25.5 percent of non-Hispanic White men.

Although the prevalence of smoking has been historically higher among African-American men (by about 20 percent), their overall exposure to tobacco smoke seems to be lower than that of White men. On average, White men tend to consume more cigarettes (about 30 percent to 40 percent more) than African-American men.^{VI} Such differences in exposure to smoke will be even more pronounced as rates of smoking between the races continue to become similar. Despite their lower exposure, however, African-American men are still 50 percent more likely than White men to develop lung cancer.

In 2002, non-Hispanic Black women were 14 percent less likely to be current smokers than non-Hispanic White women (18.7 vs. 21.8 percent). They also smoked half the number of cigarettes on a daily basis

as did White women.^{VII} However, like African-American men, African-American women are more likely to develop and die from lung cancer.

One explanation for the disparity between African Americans and Whites with regard to their vulnerability to lung cancer is that African Americans seem to absorb more nicotine and perhaps other toxins than do Whites. A recent study found that nicotine intake per cigarette was 30 percent greater in African Americans than in Whites and that African Americans had slower clearance of cotinine (the metabolite of nicotine) from the body.^{VIII}

Another explanation, though less viable, is that African Americans are more strongly affected by cigarette smoke because they use menthol cigarettes more often than other groups. Menthol may help the body absorb harmful cigarette smoke ingredients. In addition, menthol's cooling and numbing properties may permit larger puffs, deeper inhalation or allow a person to hold smoke in the lungs for a longer period of time, all of which would result in increased exposure to the cancer-causing ingredients in tobacco smoke. African Americans have preferred menthol brands of cigarettes since their introduction before World War II, and marketing and advertising of these brands have specifically targeted them. Currently, more than 75 percent of African-American smokers use mentholated brands compared with fewer than 25 percent of White smokers. The brands Newport, Kool and Salem account for 55 percent of total tobacco use among African Americans.^{IX}

Similar brand preference is found among African-American teens: 61.3 percent prefer Newport, 10.9 percent prefer Kool and 9.7 percent prefer Salem.^X In 2002, 14.3 percent of African-American high school students smoked. African-American high school students were significantly less likely than White and Hispanic students to report current smoking. Among middle school students, rates were relatively equal, with about one in 10 White (10.4 percent), African-American (9.4 percent) and Hispanic (9.1 percent) students currently smoking. However, African-American middle school students had the highest level of current use of any tobacco products.

Currently, the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation is running a campaign for Kool cigarettes aimed at African-American youths that features hip-hop characters. This appears to be in violation of a settlement between the industry and 46 states.^{XI}

Consider the Differences...

- African-Americans have similar rates of cigarette smoking to Whites and lower overall exposure to tobacco smoke, but are more susceptible to developing and dying from lung cancer.
- In 2002, 9.0 percent of African-American women of reproductive age smoked while pregnant, compared with 13.0 percent of Whites and 3.2 percent of Hispanic women.
- Although African-American smokers are more likely than White smokers to quit for at least one day, White smokers are 1.5 times more likely to succeed in quitting than African Americans.
- A one-year study found that three major African-American publications -- Ebony, Jet and Essence -- received proportionately higher profits from

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