

Doctors urge FDA action on new menthol cigarettes, flavored cigars

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What's the news: The AMA and over a dozen other physician and health care advocacy organizations are calling on the Food and Drug Administration to “prioritize enforcement action” against two new flavored tobacco products—a menthol cigarette called Newport Boost, and the White Owl brand of flavored cigars.

The call for action comes after the agency’s long-overdue move in April to announce it planned to ban menthol flavoring in cigarettes and flavoring of all kinds in cigars, which itself followed a lawsuit filed last year by the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council, Action on Smoking and Health, AMA and National Medical Association.

These organizations were joined in a letter to the FDA Center for Tobacco Products by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, Association of Black Cardiologists, the NAACP and others. Along with calling for prioritized enforcement against the new products, the organizations said the FDA should “expedite the issuance of proposed and final rules to establish menthol cigarette and flavored cigar product standards to eliminate these products from the marketplace.”

Why it's important: When the FDA announced in the spring that it would ban menthol flavoring, then-AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD, called it “a major step toward preventing a new generation from becoming tobacco users,” noting that “for too long, tobacco companies have been enabled to promote menthol cigarettes to the Black community, preying particularly on Black youth.”

Tobacco is the leading cause of preventable death worldwide. Smoking-related illnesses are the leading causes of death among Black people, and 85% of African Americans who smoke use menthol cigarettes.

In the joint letter, the AMA and its co-signatory organizations said the Newport Boost cigarettes (promoted as boosting “menthol to more menthol”) appear “to be a new addition to Reynolds’ line of

menthol capsule cigarettes,” introduced long after the 2007 date before which tobacco products were grandfathered and exempted from securing FDA marketing authorization.

The White Owl flavored cigars, meanwhile, also are new and have been promoted in “particularly egregious” fashion, such as a January advertisement for its youth-appealing “Limited Edition Chocolate & Vanilla Swirl” flavor.

“The longer the FDA takes to act, the greater the opportunity for the tobacco companies to introduce even more new menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars to increase the appeal of these deadly and addictive products,” says the joint letter sent in August.

Learn more: The AMA has longstanding policies in support of banning menthol in combustible tobacco products and calling for the FDA to prohibit the use of flavoring agents in all tobacco products.

That opposition to flavoring agents extends to e-cigarettes and vaping, which the AMA has declared a public health epidemic.