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## A Move to Ban Menthol Cigarettes

### What is the issue?

The US Food and Drug Administration has issued a proposal to ban menthol cigarettes and flavoured cigars.

### What are menthol cigarettes?

- Menthol cigarettes are flavored with menthol, which triggers the cold-sensitive nerves in the skin.
- Menthol has a cooling and anesthetic (or pain killing) effect which decreases the cough reflex and can soothe the dry throat feeling that many smokers have.
- As a result, menthol smokers may inhale more deeply, hold the smoke in the lungs longer, and get more exposure to the dangerous chemicals in cigarette smoke.
- Menthol cigarettes cause diseases including cancer, cardiovascular, respiratory diseases and multiple adverse reproductive outcomes.
- Menthol products accounted for approximately one-fifth of the United States cigarette market in 2006.
- About 85% of African Americans smokers prefer menthol cigarettes in comparison to 29% of white smokers.

### What exactly is the FDA proposal?

- Some states in the US have already banned menthol cigarettes but the FDA plans to extend the prohibition countrywide.
- Apart from menthol, all other flavours in cigarettes were banned in the US in 2009.
- FDA's proposal aims to prohibit menthol as a characterizing flavor in cigarettes and prohibit all characterizing flavors (other than tobacco) in cigars.
- The proposed ban does **not** cover electronic cigarettes.

### What is the need for the ban?

- **Prevent children from smoking**- The proposed rules would help prevent children from becoming the next generation of smokers and help adult smokers quit.
- **Health equity**- The proposed rules are an important step to advance health equity by significantly reducing tobacco-related health disparities.
- **Health effects**- Menthol also interacts with nicotine in the brain to enhance nicotine's addictive effects, while making it more difficult for people to quit smoking.
- **Research studies**- Modeling studies have estimated a 15% reduction in smoking within 40 years if menthol cigarettes were banned.

## How did menthol cigarettes become more popular among Black smokers?

- Over decades, tobacco companies used “predatory” and “targetted” advertising to attract Black consumers towards menthol cigarettes through culturally tailored advertising images and messages.
- The tobacco industry attempts to maintain a positive image among African Americans by supporting cultural events and making contributions to minority higher education institutions, elected officials, civic and community organizations, and scholarship programs.
- Tobacco firms use price promotions such as discounts and multi-pack coupons which are most often used by African Americans.
- Although African Americans usually smoke fewer cigarettes and start smoking cigarettes at an older age, they are more likely to die from smoking-related diseases than Whites.

## Why is the proposed ban criticized?

- **Validity of the data-** Tobacco firms have disputed the scientific evidence that menthol cigarettes are more harmful than regular cigarettes.
- **Loss of revenue-** Some have claimed that the ban will cause the government significant revenue loss.
- **Black marketing-** Taking these products out of the legal marketplace will push them into unregulated, criminal markets that don't follow any regulations and ignore minimum age laws.
- **Targets African Americans-** Some activists have flagged concerns that the ban could push Black smokers towards criminalization.

*The first country in the world to ban menthol cigarettes was Brazil, in 2012. India has not banned the sale of menthol cigarettes.*

## How would a similar ban play out in India?

*India has 26.7 crore tobacco users aged 15 and above, as per the last available Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS 2016-17).*

- Tobacco regulation laws in India are covered under Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003, or COTPA,
- It restricts the advertisement, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products,
- It prohibits smoking in public places and sale to and by minors
- It also prohibits the sale of tobacco products within a radius of 100 yards of educational institutions and requires mandatory depiction of specified pictorial health warnings on all tobacco product packs.
- In 2019, the Centre banned electronic cigarettes.
- In addition, different states have their own rules in place banning hookah consumption, including flavoured hookahs, in public places.
- **Impact of banning menthol cigarette in India-** The impact of such a step would only be on young adults and women who are just starting to smoke.
- Banning it could prevent new users from beginning smoking but it is likely to reduce initiation

to regular smoking.

- Banning products has logistical issues as well as things will be smuggled.
- Other than banning tobacco products outrightly, experts stressed a need for oversight on social media platforms, content streaming websites, and web based shopping portals.

## References

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