

# Time to stub out flavoured cigarettes

Menthol, fruit and other novelty flavours are why young Singaporeans still experiment with smoking. A ban on these flavours might be effective, as Singapore nears its endgame in its fight against tobacco use.

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For *The Straits Times*

Who knew that menthol, grape and lemon flavours could be so dangerous? Tempting flavours, however, are still luring young people into a potentially lethal habit – smoking cigarettes.

Singapore has done well to clamp down on smoking, ever since launching its national smoking prevention campaign, “Towards a Nation of

Non-Smokers”, over 30 years ago. At the time, Singapore’s tobacco regulations were among the world’s strictest.

The prevalence of smoking in Singapore is around 10 per cent, not far from the tobacco endgame target of 5 per cent.

But there’s a problem: Young people are still picking up cigarettes, and it’s largely because of the attractive flavours in which cigarettes are still sold.

One measure that could have a massive impact on smoking rates would be to ban added tobacco flavours such as menthol and fruit.

Over 50 per cent of the cigarettes sold in Singapore are flavoured. That’s far more than in most other countries, where the market share of flavoured cigarettes is typically 5 per cent to 25 per cent.

Countless scientific studies have shown that added flavours make cigarettes more appealing to youth as they mask their harsh tobacco taste. Some flavours, like menthol, also interact with nicotine in the brain, making the cigarettes more addictive.

Studies also consistently show that tobacco companies use flavoured cigarettes to target youth. Without new waves of young clientele, the tobacco business won’t survive, and with

ever-increasing restrictions on tobacco marketing, the companies have to find new ways to target them.

In Singapore, tobacco companies have been targeting youth with flavoured cigarettes since the 1980s. They carefully researched the lifestyles, values and preferences of Singaporean youth and developed flavoured cigarettes and marketing themes to appeal to them.

Some of these marketing themes emphasised the “freshness” or “novelty” of a new flavour. Others framed flavoured cigarettes as being less harmful. This was despite the fact that the tobacco companies knew that menthol and “light” cigarettes are not safer. Many of their menthols and lights actually contained similar tar and nicotine levels as regular cigarettes.

In recent years, tobacco companies have also started selling capsule cigarettes which contain a crushable flavour capsule in the filter. When it is crushed, it releases a flavour like menthol, berry or lemon into the cigarette.

Some capsule cigarettes contain multiple capsule flavours, like mint and grape. Others are sold in a mix of flavours similar to packets of sweets children

used to be able to buy.

A recent study found that when the tobacco industry first marketed these capsule cigarettes, in the 2000s, their main target was the millennial generation who at that time were in their teens and early 20s.

The tobacco industry believed that capsule cigarettes would appeal to a young generation that was embracing new technologies, individuality and a sense of control – much like today’s generation Z teenagers.

In Singapore, too, researchers found that menthol, capsules, and novelty flavours appeal to young people, especially females, and are an important reason behind why youth in Singapore still experiment with smoking.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Cigarettes are the only legally available product that, when used correctly, kill half of their users. If a product with that level of known harm was introduced today, there is no way it would stay on the market.

About time, then, that countries like New Zealand, Canada, Scotland, Ireland and Finland have set “tobacco endgame” goals to get rid of tobacco completely. Generally this is defined as a

smoking prevalence of 5 per cent or less. This is the level at which experts believe smoking will be obsolete, while accounting for some illicit trade.

Other places have already reached this goal. Bhutan, the Vatican and Beverley Hills have all banned tobacco sales.

Over the years, Singapore has progressively tightened regulations to include more smoke-free areas, more taxes, plain tobacco packaging, tobacco advertising bans, bans on shisha and e-cigarettes and a minimum legal smoking age of 21, along with public education campaigns and quit services.

In a 2019 survey of over 1,000 members of the Singapore public, the majority (59 per cent) of respondents felt that Singapore should just ban smoking altogether. Almost a third (29 per cent) were neutral on the matter, and only a minority (12 per cent) disagreed.

Put simply: If the other countries can do it, so can Singapore.

Then the question is: How?

Halving a country’s smoking prevalence from 10 per cent to 5 per cent is not something that can be done overnight. It will require a concerted effort over time with a combination of established interventions, such as quit support, tobacco taxes and smoke-free areas, along with other, perhaps bolder measures.

A ban on adding flavours to cigarettes would certainly be one such measure.

Tobacco flavours including menthol are already banned in the European Union, Canada, parts of the United States and several African countries.

Although most of these bans were implemented quite recently, early studies have found that these bans reduce tobacco use and encourage quitting among smokers.

But a tobacco flavours ban could have a far more substantial impact on smoking prevalence in Singapore, as the market share for flavoured cigarettes is over 50 per cent. We would expect a near-immediate decrease as smokers of flavoured cigarettes quit. We would also expect a sustained reduction in the long term, as fewer youth take up the habit.

As with any tobacco regulation, a flavours ban should be complemented with other measures, especially quit services to help those flavoured cigarette smokers who want to quit.

If cigarettes were introduced today, with everything that is known about their harmfulness, there is no way they would be kept on the market. Perhaps it’s about time, then, that we no longer allow them to be sold like sweets.

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