

CAMPAIGN For TOBACCO-FREE Kids®

Smoker Perceptions of “Light” and “Low Tar” Cigarettes

A number of scientific surveys have examined how smokers perceive “light,” “ultra light” and “low tar” cigarettes and their motivations for smoking these brands. The studies conclude that many smokers of “light” and “ultra light” cigarettes mistakenly believe that these cigarettes have lower tar and nicotine levels. Many consumers also assume that these products present less of a health risk than other cigarettes. However, the scientific evidence has shown that, in practice, “light” cigarettes have not produced a public health benefit and have not lowered disease risk among smokers.¹

Foods with descriptors such as “light” or “low in fat” are required by the Food and Drug Administration to provide an actual benefit to consumers – a specified reduction in calorie content or fat grams.² With the absence of FDA regulation over tobacco products, there is no equivalent protection for consumers of cigarettes branded as “light” or “low tar.” In fact, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) has found that the tar and nicotine yields, as measured by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) testing method, do not give smokers meaningful information about the amount of tar and nicotine they will actually receive from a cigarette.³

Since the creation of these products, tobacco companies have aggressively marketed “light,” “ultra light” and “low tar” cigarettes to smokers concerned about their health, positioning these products as an alternative to quitting.⁴

Smokers Perceive “Light” Cigarettes As Less Hazardous Than Regular Cigarettes

Despite the mounting evidence on the absence of health benefits from smoking low yield products, a 1999 survey shows that smokers are still misinformed. Smokers in the survey believed that, on average, “light” cigarettes presented a 25 percent reduction in risk and “ultra lights” presented a 33 percent reduction risk compared to regular cigarettes.^{5,6} Consistent with the results of previous research, “light” and “ultra light” smokers feel that their brands offer fewer risks compared to regular cigarettes. The study found that smokers’ beliefs that “lights” and “ultra lights” deliver less tar and nicotine and their sense that the products were less harsh contribute to the perception that these cigarettes are safer.⁷

Additional research confirms that smokers hold mistaken beliefs about “light,” “ultra light” and “low tar” cigarettes. These opinions are reinforced by the product descriptors alone. Indeed, most smokers do not know the tar or nicotine yield of their cigarettes, yet they can easily identify whether they smoke regular, “light” or “ultra light” products.^{8,9,10}

Smokers of “light” and “ultra light” cigarettes are more likely to say that some cigarette brands are more hazardous than others. Sixty (60) percent of smokers of “ultra light” cigarettes and 46 percent of smokers of “light” brands said that some cigarette brands are more hazardous than others (compared to 39 percent of smokers of regular yield brands).¹¹

Smokers of “light” and “ultra light” cigarettes (particularly “ultra light” smokers) are also more likely to state that *their* brand is less hazardous compared to other brands. Almost half of “ultra light” smokers (48 percent) said that their brand is less hazardous than others, compared to 12 percent of smokers of regular brands.¹²

Desire To Reduce Health Risks Is a Key Motivation For Smoking "Light" Cigarettes

A survey in the July 1998 *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that many smokers choose "light" or "ultra light" cigarettes to reduce smoking risks. Half of the smokers of "light" cigarettes and nearly three fourths of "ultra light" smokers said that they smoked those cigarettes to reduce the tar and nicotine they get from smoking. Additionally, 39 percent of "light" smokers and 58 percent of "ultra light" smokers said that they smoke "lights"/"ultra lights" to reduce the risks of smoking without having to give up smoking. A large majority of these smokers also indicated that they smoked "lights" or "ultra lights" because they preferred the taste compared to regular cigarettes.¹³

Despite the fact that many smokers choose "light" or "ultra light" cigarettes to reduce their exposure to tar and nicotine, and smoking risks in general, 9 out of 10 smokers did not know that one "ultra light" cigarette could deliver the same amount of tar as one regular cigarette. And more than one quarter of the "light" and "ultra light" smokers said they would be likely to quit if they knew this information.¹⁴

In an earlier study, 44 percent of smokers indicated that they had switched to a "low tar" or "low nicotine" cigarette just to reduce their health risk.¹⁵ Another study revealed that smokers of "ultra light" (84 percent) and "light" (79 percent) cigarettes are more likely to say that they are concerned about the health effects of smoking than are smokers of regular cigarettes (68 percent).¹⁶

Smoking "Light" Cigarettes Can Be a Barrier To Quitting

Scientific studies reveal that, in addition to expressing greater concerns about the health risks of smoking, the people who choose to smoke "light" and "ultra light" cigarettes are also the most interested in quitting. However, the act of switching to a brand they think is safer may reduce their motivation to stop smoking.¹⁷

In a study published in 1998, 30 percent of "light" smokers and nearly half of "ultra light" smokers indicated one of the reasons they chose to smoke those brands is that they considered it to be a step toward quitting completely.¹⁸ An earlier survey found that 38 percent of smokers who had switched brands switched to "low tar" and "low nicotine" cigarettes as a quitting strategy.¹⁹ However, there are no data that show switching to reduced tar cigarettes increases the likelihood that a smoker will successfully quit.²⁰

Formerly confidential tobacco industry documents, made public in legal proceedings against the industry, reveal that tobacco companies introduced and marketed "light" and "ultra light" brands to provide smokers who were increasingly concerned about their health an alternative to quitting.²¹ The documents reveal that the tobacco companies knew that "low tar" cigarettes may keep smokers from quitting. A 1978 Imperial Tobacco document says "We have evidence of virtually no quitting among smokers of these brands, and there are indications that the advent of ultra low tar cigarettes has actually retained some potential smokers in the cigarette market by offering them a viable alternative."²²

Indeed, a 1986 study found that smokers of "light" and "ultra light" cigarettes were actually *less* likely to quit than smokers of regular cigarettes.²³ The same study found that smokers who had *never* switched to a low tar or nicotine brand were more likely to quit than people who switched to the lower tar brand.

New research, however, suggests that messages that challenge smokers' misperceptions about "low tar" cigarettes can change their attitudes and increase their desire to quit.

A recent study found that a Massachusetts tobacco prevention program's advertising campaign to tell consumers the truth about "low tar" cigarettes not only increased smokers' knowledge about "low tar" cigarettes but also increased the number of smokers trying to quit.²⁴

Another study found that, after hearing a public service announcement citing scientific evidence of the risks of smoking "light" cigarettes (including the fact that one "light" cigarette can give smokers just as much tar and nicotine as one regular cigarette), more than half of the smokers (55 percent) said that the message made them think more about quitting and 46 percent said that the message increased the amount they wanted to quit.²⁵ In a 1999 study, messages addressing the myth of "light" cigarettes more effectively increased interest in quitting than general messages about the health risks of smoking.²⁶

National Center for Tobacco-Free Kids, November 20, 2001

Related Campaign Fact Sheets (available at www.tobaccofreekids.org)

The Cigarette Companies and "Safer" Cigarettes

¹ *Risks Associated with Smoking Cigarettes with Low Machine-Yields of Tar and Nicotine; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 13.

² Food and Drug Administration. *FDA Backgrounder: The Food Label.* May, 1999. <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fdnewlab.html>

³ *Risks Associated with Smoking Cigarettes with Low Machine-Yields of Tar and Nicotine; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 13.

⁴ Pollay R. & Dewhirst T., "Marketing Cigarettes with Low Machine-Measured Yields," in *Risks Associated with Smoking Cigarettes with Low Machine-Yields of Tar and Nicotine; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 13.

⁵ *Risks Associated with Smoking Cigarettes with Low Machine-Yields of Tar and Nicotine; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 13.

⁶ Shiffman S, et al, "Smokers beliefs about light and ultralight cigarettes," *Tobacco Control* (in press).

⁷ Shiffman S, et al, "Smokers beliefs about light and ultralight cigarettes," *Tobacco Control* (in press).

⁸ Cohen JB. "Consumer/smoker perceptions of Federal Trade Commission tar ratings," in *The FTC Cigarette Test Method for Determining Tar, Nicotine, and Carbon Monoxide Yields of U.S. Cigarettes; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 7.

⁹ Kozlowski, L.T., et al., "Smokers' Misperceptions of Light and Ultra-Light Cigarettes May Keep Them Smoking," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 15(1): 9-16 (July 1998).

¹⁰ Giovino, G. et al., "Attitudes, Knowledge, and Beliefs About Low-yield Cigarettes Among Adolescents and Adults," in *The FTC Cigarette Test Method for Determining Tar, Nicotine, and Carbon Monoxide Yields of U.S. Cigarettes; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 7.

¹¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adult use of Tobacco Survey. Public use data tape, 1986 in *The FTC Cigarette Test Method for Determining Tar, Nicotine, and Carbon Monoxide Yields of U.S. Cigarettes; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 7.

¹² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adult use of Tobacco Survey. Public use data tape, 1986 in *The FTC Cigarette Test Method for Determining Tar, Nicotine, and Carbon Monoxide Yields of U.S.*

Cigarettes; Report of the NCI Expert Committee. National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 7.

¹³ Kozlowski, L.T., et al., "Smokers' Misperceptions of Light and Ultra-Light Cigarettes May Keep Them Smoking," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 15(1): 9-16 (July 1998).

¹⁴ Kozlowski, L.T., et al., "Smokers' Misperceptions of Light and Ultra-Light Cigarettes May Keep Them Smoking," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 15(1): 9-16 (July 1998).

¹⁵ National Center for Health Statistics. National Health Interview Survey Cancer Control Supplement. Public use data tape, 1987, in *The FTC Cigarette Test Method for Determining Tar, Nicotine, and Carbon Monoxide Yields of U.S. Cigarettes; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 7.

¹⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adult use of Tobacco Survey. Public use data tape, 1986 in *The FTC Cigarette Test Method for Determining Tar, Nicotine, and Carbon Monoxide Yields of U.S. Cigarettes; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 7.

¹⁷ *Risks Associated with Smoking Cigarettes with Low Machine-Yields of Tar and Nicotine; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 13.

¹⁸ Kozlowski, L.T., et al., "Smokers' Misperceptions of Light and Ultra-Light Cigarettes May Keep Them Smoking," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 15(1): 9-16 (July 1998).

¹⁹ National Center for Health Statistics. National Health Interview Survey Cancer Control Supplement. Public use data tape, 1987, in *The FTC Cigarette Test Method for Determining Tar, Nicotine, and Carbon Monoxide Yields of U.S. Cigarettes; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 7.

²⁰ *Risks Associated with Smoking Cigarettes with Low Machine-Yields of Tar and Nicotine; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 13.

²¹ Hurt RD, Robertson CR. Prying open the door to the tobacco industry's secrets about nicotine. The Minnesota Tobacco Trial. *JAMA* 1998;280:1173-81.

²² Response of the Market and of Imperial Tobacco to the smoking and health environment. Imperial Tobacco Ltd., p.2 (15102). Montreal Court of Appeal, Case Numbers 500-09-001296-912 and 500-090001297-910. 1991. Joint Record, Exhibit Number AG-4. Volume 76, pp.15101-15110, in Collishaw, N. *From Montreal to Minnesota: Following the Trail of Imperial Tobacco's Document*, September 1999. http://www.smoke-free.ca/eng_research/pscresearch_papers.htm

²³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adult use of Tobacco Survey. Public use data tape, 1986 in *The FTC Cigarette Test Method for Determining Tar, Nicotine, and Carbon Monoxide Yields of U.S. Cigarettes; Report of the NCI Expert Committee.* National Institutes of Health. National Cancer Institute. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph 7.

²⁴ Kozlowski, L.T., et al., "Massachusetts' Advertising Against Light Cigarettes Appears to Change Beliefs and Behavior," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (May 2000).

²⁵ Kozlowski, L.T., et al., "Smoker Reactions to a 'Radio Message' That Light Cigarettes Are as Dangerous as Regular Cigarettes," *Nicotine Tobacco Res* 1999;1: 67-76.

²⁶ Shiffman S, et al, "The Effect of Health Messages about 'Light' and 'Ultra Light' Cigarettes on Beliefs and Quitting Intent," *Tobacco Control* (in press).