

The Rise of Cigars and Cigar-Smoking Harms



Although cigarette smoking has declined, total consumption of cigars in the United States has increased dramatically since 1993, reversing a decline in consumption that had persisted for most of the twentieth century.¹ Between 2000 and 2023, for example, cigar consumption increased by 88 percent while cigarette consumption declined by 59 percent.² Unfortunately, many mistakenly believe that cigars are not harmful, but, in fact, cigars are addictive and harmful and are often marketed in a wide variety of kid-friendly flavors. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) stated that “Cigars are associated with significant risk and provide no public health benefit.”³

Health Harms to Users from Cigar Smoking

FDA has concluded that “all cigars pose serious negative health risks” and that “all cigar use is harmful and potentially addictive.”⁴ Each year, about 9,000 Americans die prematurely from regular cigar use.⁵ Cigar smoke is composed of the same toxic and carcinogenic constituents found in cigarette smoke.⁶ According to the National Cancer Institute’s Monograph No. 9, smoking cigars causes serious health consequences.⁷ For example:

- Cigar smoking causes cancer of the oral cavity, larynx, esophagus, and lung.⁸
- Daily cigar smokers, particularly those who inhale, have an increased risk of heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).
- Cigar smokers are at increased risk for an aortic aneurysm.
- Cigar smokers have higher rates of lung cancer, heart disease, and lung disease than nonsmokers.
- Male cigar smokers are up to eight times more likely than nonsmokers to die from oral cancer and ten times more likely to die from laryngeal cancers.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM)’s report on premium cigars noted that “[a]ll cigars contain harmful and potentially harmful constituents, and the extent to which they negatively affect health largely depends on how they are used (e.g., frequency and duration of use, pattern of inhalation).”⁹ In addition, health risks varies whether the cigar smoker is a primary (current, exclusive cigar smoker with no prior history of cigarette or pipe smoking) or secondary (current, exclusive cigar smoker with prior history of cigarette or pipe smoking) cigar smoker.¹⁰

- According to a recent study, “all cigar products delivered significant and addictive quantities of nicotine and CO [carbon monoxide].”¹¹
- Compared to never smokers, people who had exclusively ever smoked cigars had a higher risk of developing tobacco-related cancer, particularly lung cancer and head and neck cancers.¹²
- A recent analysis of data from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) found that “nearly 200,000 cardiovascular conditions and cancer cases were attributable to exclusive cigar smoking among US adults aged ≥35 years in 2015.”¹³
- For primary cigar smokers, higher smoking intensity (more cigars per day) and greater inhalation are associated with greater risks for oral, esophageal, laryngeal, and lung cancers.¹⁴
- Overall, exclusive cigar smokers had higher risks for all-cause mortality compared to never tobacco users.¹⁵

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- While many believe that cigars are not harmful because cigar smoke is not inhaled, studies have shown that some cigar smokers do inhale, thereby absorbing smoke into their lungs and bloodstream and depositing smoke particles in their lungs as well as their stomachs and digestive tract.¹⁶
- All cigar smokers, whether they inhale or not, expose their lips, tongue and throat to smoke and its toxic and cancer-causing chemicals.¹⁷
- Some youth and adult users smoke “small” or “little” cigars with full inhalation, just like cigarettes.¹⁸
- A study that examined National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data from 1999-2012 found that cigar smokers have higher concentrations of several toxic and carcinogenic substances than nontobacco users. Among daily cigar smokers, researchers also found concentrations of NNAL, a known lung carcinogen, comparable with those concentrations found in daily cigarette smokers.¹⁹

Harms from Secondhand Cigar Smoke

Because of their size, cigars can produce even more secondhand smoke than cigarettes and can contain higher levels of some toxins than cigarettes.²⁰ A person smoking a regular cigar creates much more air pollution than a cigarette smoker. But even in equal amounts, cigar smoke contains substantially higher levels of carbon monoxide and other toxins than cigarette smoke. At the same time, to the extent that cigar smoke is not inhaled as deeply as cigarette smoke, secondhand cigar smoke is also less “filtered” than secondhand cigarette smoke before bystanders are exposed to it.²¹

Cigar Smoking among Youth and Adults

Youth Use

In the United States, while cigarette smoking has declined rapidly, particularly in the last five years, cigar smoking has declined much more slowly. Importantly, cigar smoking is not limited to adults; 330,000 middle and high school students currently use cigars.^{22*}

- In 2024, 1.5 percent of high school students reported smoking cigars in the past 30 days.^{23*}
- Cigar smoking among high school boys (2.1%) is nearly as high as cigarette smoking (2.2%).²⁴
- Black high school students smoke cigars at higher rates compared to other races or ethnicities (2.7% for Black non-Hispanic vs. 1.3% for white non-Hispanic, 1.6% for Hispanic high school students).²⁵
- Each day, more than 700 kids under 18 years old try cigar smoking for the first time.²⁶
- Cigar smoking by high school boys equals or surpasses cigarette smoking in 19 states and DC.²⁷
- In 2021, 20.7 percent of current middle school and high school cigar smokers smoked them on at least 20 of the preceding 30 days, which is considered frequent use.²⁸
- Among middle and high school students who currently used two or more tobacco products in 2019, the most common combination reported was e-cigarettes and cigars (17%).²⁹
- A recent national longitudinal study found that between 2013 and 2018, “9.1% of cigarette initiation among non-Hispanic black youth was attributable to cigar products.” According to the study’s authors, “decreasing cigar use among youth could prevent up to 4.6% of cigarette initiation overall and 9.1% among black youth specifically.”³⁰
- Black & Mild is one of the most popular cigar brands among 12-17 year olds.³¹ They are made by John Middleton, Inc., which is owned by Altria, the parent company of Philip Morris USA (makers of Marlboro, the most popular cigarette brand among 12-17 year olds³²).³³

* Cigars are defined as cigars, cigarillos or little cigars.

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- In 2020, cigarillos were the most popular type of cigar smoked by current youth cigar smokers (44.1%), followed by regular cigars (33.1%), then little cigars (22.6%), with 21.8% reporting not knowing the cigar type used.³⁴

Adult Use

In 2021, 3.5 percent of all adults reported smoking cigars, cigarillos or filtered cigars every day or some days.³⁵

- Trend data showed a statistically significant increase among non-Hispanic Blacks between 2000 and 2015 (2.0% in 2000 to 3.3% in 2015), which “coincided with changes in cigar flavor availability and pack sizes and price, particularly in the mass-merchandise market.”³⁶
- In 2021, cigar smoking rates among non-Hispanic Blacks (5.1%) were higher than non-Hispanic whites (3.7%) and Hispanic adults (2.5%).³⁷

Cigars with Kid-Friendly Flavors³⁸

The 2012 Surgeon General’s report, *Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults*, highlights the need to address flavored cigars, particularly because some cigar manufacturers have manipulated flavored cigarettes to become flavored cigars to circumvent the ban on flavored cigarettes in the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act.³⁹

Cigars are marketed in a range of flavors that are attractive to kids, such as candy, fruit and chocolate.⁴⁰ “Candy-flavored” is an appropriate descriptor, given research showing that the same flavor chemicals used in sweet-flavored cigars of various sizes are also used in popular candy and drink products such as LifeSavers, Jolly Ranchers, and Kool-Aid.⁴¹ The 2024 Surgeon General’s Report, *Eliminating Tobacco-Related Disease and Death: Addressing Disparities*, stated, “Tobacco industry documents suggest that product design and flavoring was a deliberate and iterative process to optimize the appeal of cigarillos and little cigars to youth, women, and African American people who smoke, especially those who smoke mentholated tobacco products.”⁴²

Nielsen convenience store market scanner data show that the share of flavored cigars rose from 45% in 2009 to 53.3% in 2020, while the share of non-flavored cigars declined. Among flavored cigars sold in these stores in 2020, the most popular flavors were sweet or candy (30.6%), fruit (29.5%), concept (21.4%), and wine (9.0%).⁴³ Earlier data show that sales of flavored cigars in convenience stores increased by nearly 50% between 2008 and 2015, with the number of unique cigar flavor names more than doubling from 108 to 250.⁴⁴

The top five most popular cigar brands among 12- to 17-year olds who have used cigars – Backwoods, White Owl, Swisher Sweets, Black & Mild, and Dutch Masters – all come in flavor varieties.⁴⁵ For example, Black & Mild cigars come in flavors such as apple and cherry; Swisher Sweets comes in a wide variety of flavors such as tropical fusion, Maui pineapple, twisted berry, cherry dynamite, and banana smash; and White Owl has flavors such as mango, tropical twist, strawberry kiwi, and peach.

Nielsen convenience store market scanner data also show an increasing number of products with names that do not explicitly identify a flavor, such as Swisher’s “Wild Rush” and Altria’s “Jazz,” even though they are flavored. From 2012 to 2016, the proportion of all cigar sales comprised by these products (which researchers call “concept flavors”) increased from 9 percent to 15 percent. The increase was greatest among cigarillos, among which the number of unique concept flavors more than doubled, from 17 to 46.⁴⁶

- Data from the 2023 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS) show that 270,000 youth, representing 70.7 percent of current high school cigar smokers and 53.1 percent of middle school cigar smokers, used flavored cigars. Among current youth users of flavored cigars, the most popular flavor is fruit (43.8%).⁴⁷

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- The 2018-2019 wave of PATH data found that 60.4 percent of 12-17 year olds who had ever tried cigars started with a flavored cigar.⁴⁸ In 2013-2014, 73.8 percent of youth cigar smokers reported that they smoked cigars “because they come in flavors I like.”⁴⁹
- Youth and young adults prefer cigar brands that come in a variety of flavors, and preference for flavored products decreases significantly with age (95% of 12-17 year old cigar smokers report use of a usual brand that makes flavored cigars compared with 63% of cigar smokers aged 35 and older).⁵⁰ For example, Swisher Sweets products, including cigarillos and blunts, come in flavors such as chocolate and strawberry, and national survey data show that Swisher Sweets is one of the most popular cigar brands among youth aged 12-17.⁵¹
- Data from the 2009-2010 National Adult Tobacco Survey (NATS) suggest that flavored cigar products are driving cigar use among adults. With few exceptions, use of flavored cigars among adult cigar smokers is highest among those groups with the highest overall cigar use rates, including young adults aged 18-24 (57.1%), income below \$20,000 (51.7%), and non-Hispanic others (62.4%).⁵²
- Data from the 2009-2010 NATS indicate that use of flavored cigars decreases with age. Flavored cigar use among cigar smokers was 57.1 percent among 18-24 year olds, 43.2 percent among 25-44 year olds, 28.9 percent among 45-64 year olds and 13.4 percent among those ages 65 and older.⁵³

Cigar Marketing

Cigar makers use a variety of marketing strategies to attract young people, including shiny, colorful packaging that boldly communicates sweet flavors, abundant ads at the point-of-sale, sponsoring concerts and other events, recruiting celebrities for endorsements, and keeping prices low.⁵⁴ Cigars are also promoted through in-store displays, in magazines, and with branded merchandise and rewards programs. Many of these strategies are also used to promote cigars specifically in Black communities.

Convenience stores are still the main way that mass-marketed cigars are purchased in the U.S.⁵⁵ Cigars, with their colorful packaging and rainbow array of flavors, are prominently displayed in stores where young people can easily see them. It is common to see posters and signage advertising a variety of cigars at low prices inside and outside of stores. Marketing in these venues not only prompts current users to purchase the products, but makes the products seem acceptable and normal for young non-users. Higher perceptions of exposure to cigar marketing are associated with higher odds of daily cigar smoking.⁵⁶

Unlike cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, and e-cigarettes, cigar manufacturers currently are not required to report their annual marketing and promotional expenditures to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission. A study looking at cigar marketing expenditures from 2018 to 2022 found that cigarillos and little cigars were the most heavily promoted product across media types. The study also found that, although ad spending in consumer magazines surpassed in other media categories, the trend declined over time, in line with general declines in print advertising, while spending on radio and internet display ads increased.⁵⁷

The Cigar Industry’s Targeting of Black Americans

It is not surprising that Black youth use cigars at rates higher than other groups, when they are often surrounded by pro-cigar imagery. The tobacco industry has targeted Black communities with marketing for cheap, flavored cigars for decades. Images of young, attractive, Blacks appear throughout marketing materials for cigars, particularly those brands that are most popular with Black teens who smoke cigars.⁵⁸ The 2024 Surgeon General’s Report, *Eliminating Tobacco-Related Disease and Death: Addressing Disparities*, noted that “cigars contribute significantly to racial and ethnic disparities in the use of combustible tobacco products.”⁵⁹

As with menthol cigarettes, years of research have documented greater cigar availability and more cigar marketing, including flavored cigars and price promotions, in Black neighborhoods.⁶⁰ Black non-tobacco

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users are more than two times more likely to recall seeing ads for cigarillo and little cigar ads compared to non-Hispanic whites.⁶¹

Cigar companies market their products using imagery and themes that are popular with Black communities. Studies show that music has been an important strategy used by cigar companies – a strategy also used by cigarette companies to market menthol cigarettes. Popular Black performers like Snoop Dogg or Jadakiss have promoted cigar brands,⁶² and several cigar companies sponsor music events and programs to promote upcoming hip-hop artists.⁶³

Even an informal scan of the social media and websites of popular cigar brands show the close relationship between Black music artists and cigars. Cigar companies highlight their sponsored events on their social media accounts, and in some cases, the artists post about their performances on their own social media accounts, amplifying the exposure to followers that may not normally be exposed to cigar branding. For instance, most of the influencers used in some major cigar brands' Instagram accounts are people of color, connected to the hip-hop music industry, and have a large following.⁶⁴

The tobacco industry has a long history of building favor with the Black community through funding Black-focused organizations, newspapers and magazines, and politicians, sponsoring cultural and entertainment events, and publicly declaring support for racial equity issues. These efforts – sometimes lacking funding disclosures – lead to public misperceptions of the industry and its paid allies in opposing tobacco control policies. In reality, these companies spend much more to market and sell products that disproportionately harm the Black community and to oppose policies that would reduce those health disparities than they spend on these initiatives.⁶⁵

- In August 2020, ITG Brands' Backwoods Instagram account posted a photo of a woman wearing a Backwoods t-shirt at Black Lives Matter Plaza in Brooklyn, NY, with the caption, "we still stand #blacklivesmatter."⁶⁶
- Also in 2020, Swisher announced on social media its new "Inclusion, Diversity, and Transformation Strategy" that included partnering with "multicultural groups" and "creat[ing] opportunities for Black-owned businesses."⁶⁷
- John Middleton, a subsidiary of Altria and maker of the top-selling cigar brand, Black & Mild, has an initiative to provide business loans to Black-owned businesses through The Enterprise Centre and Growth Opps, neither of which disclose on their websites that their funding is solely from the tobacco company.⁶⁸
- One survey found that most Black/African American respondents were unsure about tobacco companies funding Black community groups and paying Black lobbyists to oppose public health policies such as banning flavored cigars.⁶⁹

Regulating and Taxing Cigars

Federal Cigar Regulation

In May 2015, FDA issued its final rule to regulate all tobacco products, including all cigar types, which went effect in early August 2016. In August 2023, a federal court ruling exempted premium cigars[†] from FDA regulation,⁷⁰ but FDA has appealed that decision. Manufacturers of non-premium cigars must follow very basic reporting requirements, including ingredients and harmful and potentially harmful constituents produced by their products. Any non-premium cigars that enter the market, or are modified, after February 15, 2007 must be reviewed by FDA to assess their health risk, addictiveness, and appeal to youth

[†] FDA has defined "premium cigars" as: "Is wrapped in whole tobacco leaf; Contains a 100 percent leaf tobacco binder; contains at least 50 percent (of the filler by weight) long filler tobacco (i.e., whole tobacco leaves that run the length of the cigar); is handmade or hand rolled (i.e., no machinery was used apart from simple tools, such as scissors to cut the tobacco prior to rolling); has no filter, nontobacco tip, or nontobacco mouthpiece; does not have a characterizing flavor other than tobacco; contains only tobacco, water, and vegetable gum with no other ingredients or additives; and weighs more than 6 pounds per 1,000 units." [FDA, <https://www.fda.gov/media/176810/download>.]

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– to enable FDA to determine the product’s impact on public health. FDA has made some allowances for cigar manufacturers to account for unique issues raised by cigars, such as allowing them to make blending changes to address the natural variation of tobacco without having to go through product review. In addition, manufacturers are prevented from making misleading health claims. Sales are prohibited for youth under 21, with requirements that retailers verify age. Free samples are prohibited.

Prohibiting the Sale of Flavored Cigars

States and localities have the authority to regulate the sale of tobacco products. Several states and localities have implemented policies that prohibit the sale of flavored cigars, which have been upheld by courts wherever tobacco companies have challenged them. Studies from New York City and Massachusetts, where flavored cigar sales are banned, show these policies work to reduce the availability of flavored cigars⁷¹ and lower use rates among youth.⁷² In April 2022, FDA issued a proposed product standard to prohibit characterizing flavors in cigars, but has yet to finalize the rule. FDA has estimated that this rule would prevent 34,000 youth from starting to use cigars and save approximately 800 people from premature deaths annually.⁷³

Taxing Cigars

The federal government and almost all states under-tax cigars compared to cigarettes, often making smaller cigars a less-expensive alternative to cigarettes.⁷⁴ There had been several proposals to equalize the federal excise tax rate on cigars by Congress and in the President’s Budgets, but none were successful.

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³ U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Modifications to Compliance Policy for Certain Deemed Tobacco Products, March 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190702184734/https://www.fda.gov/media/121384/download>.

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¹⁴ Chang, CM, et al., “Systematic review of cigar smoking and all cause and smoking related mortality,” *BMC Public Health* 15:390, 2015, doi: 10.1186/s12889-015-1617-5.

¹⁵ Christensen, CH, et al., “Association of Cigarette, Cigar, and Pipe Use With Mortality Risk in the US Population,” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 178(4):469-476, 2018.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Rodriguez, J, et al., “The Association of Pipe and Cigar Use with Cotinine Levels, Lung Function, and Airflow Obstruction: A Cross-sectional Study,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 152:201-210, 2010; McDonald, LJ, et al., “Deposition of Cigar Smoke Particles in the Lung: Evaluation with Ventilation Scan Using ^{99m}Tc-Labeled Sulfur Colloid Particles,” *Journal of Nuclear Medicine* 43:1591-1595, 2002. Chang, CM, et al., “Systematic review of cigar smoking and all cause and smoking related mortality,” *BMC Public Health* 15:390, 2015, doi: 10.1186/s12889-015-1617-5.

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