



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 2022, for example, cigar consumption increased by 108 percent while cigarette consumption declined by 55 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
- 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

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; 420,000 middle and high school students currently use cigars.^{22*}

- In 2023, 1.8 percent of high school students reported smoking cigars in the past 30 days.^{23*}
- High school boys are equally as likely to smoke cigars (2.3%) as they are to smoke cigarettes (2.3%).²⁴
- In 2023, Hispanic high school students smoke cigars at higher rates compared to other races or ethnicities (1.9% for Black vs. 1.4% for white, non-Hispanic or 2.3% 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 16 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
- 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 Flavors.³⁸ The 2012 Surgeon General’s report, *Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults*, highlights the need to address flavored cigars, particularly because cigar

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

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 a recent chemical analysis 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

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%).⁴² 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 250.⁴³

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.⁴⁴ 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 46.⁴⁵

- Data from the 2021 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS) show that 160,000 youth, representing 41.1 percent of current high school cigar smokers and nearly 60 percent of middle school cigar smokers, used flavored cigars. Among current youth users of flavored cigars, the most popular flavor is fruit (65%).⁴⁶
- 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.⁴⁷ In 2013-2014, 73.8 percent of youth cigar smokers reported that they smoked cigars “because they come in flavors I like.”⁴⁸
- 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).⁴⁹ 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 12-17.⁵⁰
- 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%).⁵¹
- 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.⁵²

Cigar Marketing to 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. These products are sold in a wide assortment of kid-friendly flavors and can be as cheap as three for 99 cents, making them highly appealing to kids. Images of young, attractive, Blacks appear throughout marketing materials for cigars, particularly those brands that are most popular with Black teens who smoke cigars.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ Black non-tobacco users are more than two times more likely to recall seeing ads for cigarillo and little cigar ads compared to non-Hispanic whites.⁵⁵

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 been spokespeople for cigar brands,⁵⁶ and several cigar companies sponsor music events and programs to promote upcoming hip-hop artists.⁵⁷

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 performance 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.⁵⁸

Cigars are Under Taxed & Less Restricted. The federal government and almost all of the states compound these problems by under-taxing cigars compared to cigarettes, often making smaller cigars a less-expensive alternative to cigarettes. Moreover, many laws and restrictions pertaining to cigarettes – such as federal laws banning flavored cigarettes, blocking illegal Internet sales, and restricting cigarette marketing – do not apply to cigars.† 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. In May 2015, FDA issued its final rule to regulate all tobacco products, including all cigar types, which went effect in early August 2016.

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² TTB, Tobacco Statistics.

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

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† Some cigarettes also enjoy the lower taxes and fewer restrictions placed on cigars by taking advantage of loopholes in the "cigarette" and "cigar" definitions in federal and state laws and masquerading as "little cigars" or "filtered cigars."

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