



The 'Light' Cigarette Deception

'Light' Cigarettes: What's in a Word?

Canadian cigarette companies use words like 'light', 'extra light', 'ultra light', 'mild', and 'special mild' to describe certain brands.

In 2001, as many as 69% of smokers thought 'light' cigarettes had less tar (poison), nicotine (what makes smokers hooked), and carbon monoxide (poison). One of the reasons why 'light' cigarette smokers believe that 'light' cigarettes are less harmful to their health is their taste. 'Light' cigarettes taste different from 'regular' cigarettes. They taste lighter, they taste milder, they feel less harsh.

In 2004, the majority of Canadian smokers (59%) reported consuming "light" or "mild" cigarettes.

Are These Brands Actually Lighter or Safer?

No.

The person who smokes them can, and often does, get just as much or more, tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide.

Why?

Most smokers are addicted to nicotine, a key ingredient in tobacco. They smoke to get their 'fix', the amount of nicotine their body is used to getting. This is what creates the strong urge to smoke. It is also what makes quitting so difficult.

Because 'light' cigarettes could deliver less nicotine, studies show that most 'light' cigarette smokers change their smoking pattern in order to get the 'fix' they are used to. They:

- take more puffs,
- take larger puffs,
- smoke more cigarettes,
- block the ventilation holes in the filter

(When this happens, smokers can take in more than double the amount of tar. For example, a smoker of Export 'A' Extra Light can take in 38.5 mg of tar instead of the 10 mg the machine would get).

By changing their smoking pattern, smokers get their 'fix' of nicotine. And they often end up getting more tar, carbon monoxide and other dangerous chemicals as well.

Then Why Do 'Light' Cigarettes Taste Lighter?

'Light' cigarettes taste lighter because tiny holes in the filter (called vents) allow more air to enter the cigarette. The smoker then gets an air-diluted, which makes the cigarette taste lighter. But this does not change the amount of chemicals in the smoke.

Why Did Cigarette Companies Start Making Them?

In the 1950s scientists began to show that smoking is dangerous, that it causes cancer and can kill you. So the cigarette companies made filtered cigarettes. The filters were supposed to protect the smoker.



Canadian Council for Tobacco Control
Conseil canadien pour le contrôle du tabac

In the 1970s the companies introduced 'light' cigarettes. These cigarettes were supposed to be even safer than the filtered cigarette.

Did the Cigarette Companies Know that 'Lighter' Cigarettes Weren't Lighter?

Yes.

Tobacco industry documents show us that they knew these cigarettes were not safer. They knew that smokers were getting more tar than they were listing on the packages. Some documents tell us that the industry designed cigarettes to trick the testing machines.

So Is There a Standard For 'Light' Cigarettes?

No.

There is no rule in Canada that says how much tar, nicotine, or carbon monoxide a 'light' cigarette should contain.

So What Does the Word 'Light' Really Mean?

Nothing ... except a lighter taste.

Sources:

Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey (CTUMS) 2004. Health Canada. Tobacco Control Programme.

Dr. Murray Kaiserman, Interview on National Public Radio, August 15, 2001.

Ashley MJ, Cohen JE, Ferrence R. "Light" and "mild" cigarettes: who smokes them? Are they being misled? Canadian Journal of Public Health 2002; 92(6): 407-411.

Kozlowski LT, Goldberg ME, Yost BA, White EL, Sweeney CT, Pillitteri JL. Smokers' misperceptions of light and ultra-light cigarettes may keep them smoking. American Journal of Preventive Medicine 1998; 15: 9-16.

National Cancer Institute. Risks Associated with Smoking Cigarettes with Low Machine-Measured Yields of Tar and Nicotine. Smoking and Tobacco Control Monograph no. 13. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute. 2001.

Updated January 2006