

# Smoker Misperceptions about the Harmfulness of Menthol Cigarettes: National Survey Data

Jo Peace, Nick Wilson, Deepa Weerasekera, Richard Edwards (presenter)  
Health Promotion and Policy Research Unit, Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington, New Zealand

## Background

The literature is consistent with the notion that mentholated cigarettes (“menthols”) are at least as dangerous as their non-mentholated counterparts.<sup>1</sup> There is some evidence that smokers believe that menthols are safer than non-mentholated cigarettes.<sup>2-5</sup> However, the few studies that have looked at smoker perception of menthols as being more or less harmful than other cigarettes is very limited and predominantly focuses on the African-American population residing in the US.

## Aim

To describe how smokers perceive the harmfulness of menthols in the ethnically diverse population of New Zealand (NZ).

## Methods

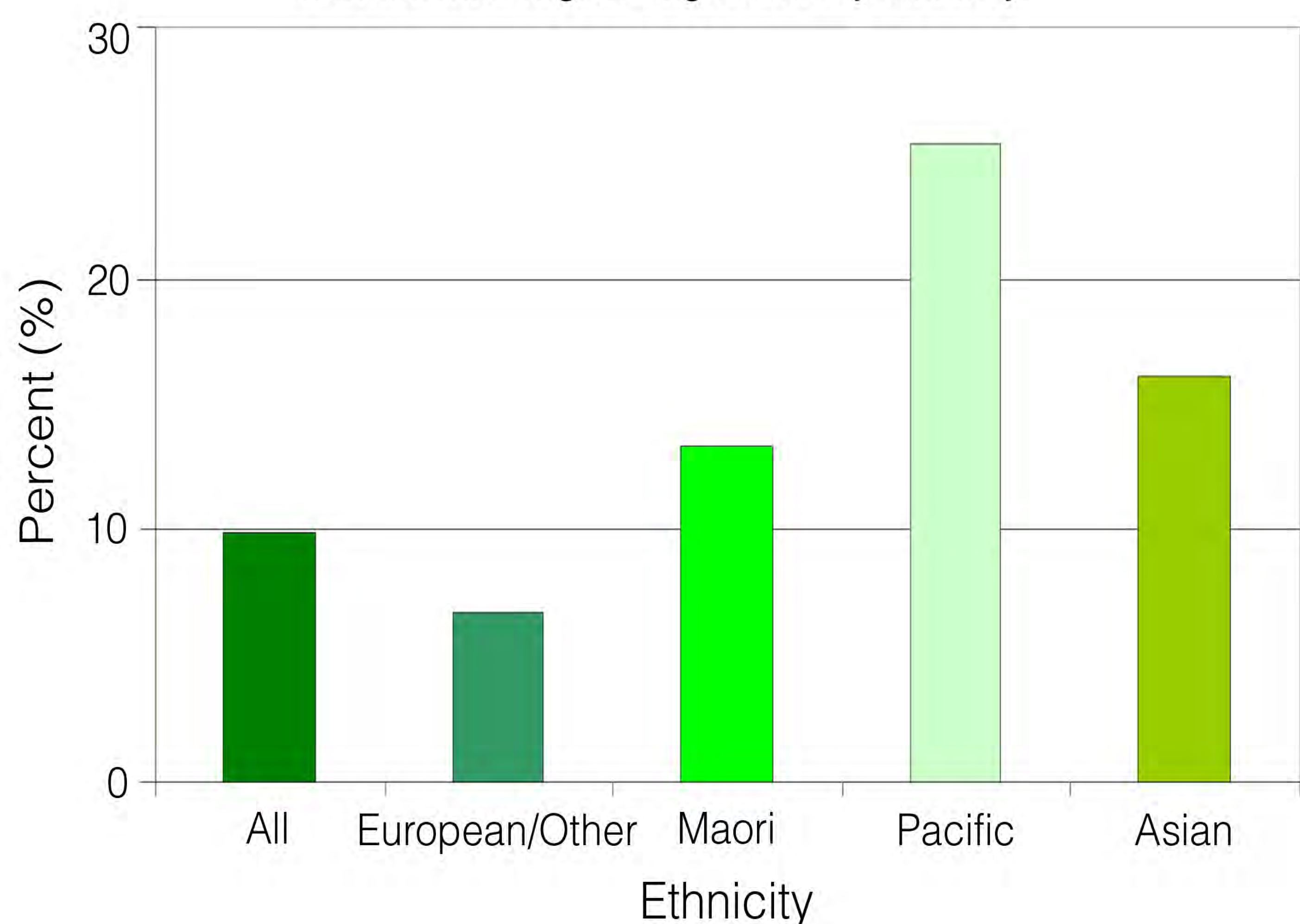
Subjects were participants in the NZ arm of the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Survey (ITC Project). The NZ ITC Cohort is derived from a nationally representative health survey, which included booster sampling of Maori, people of Pacific Island and Asian ethnic groups. From this sample we surveyed adult smokers in two survey waves (n=1376 and n=923). Results were weighted to reflect the national population of smokers and the complex sample design. Further details on the survey methods are available elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Specific questions relating to the use of menthols and to the perception of relative harmfulness were asked.

## Results

Participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement “*menthol cigarettes are less harmful than regular cigarettes.*”

- Ten percent of the participants agreed with the statement (Figure 1)
- There was significantly higher agreement by Maori and Pacific smokers compared with Europeans.
- There were no statistically significant differences by other socio-demographic variables (eg, two measures of deprivation) except for higher agreement by those suffering from one of the two measures of financial stress.

Figure 1: Percent agreement with the statement that menthols are less harmful than regular cigarettes by ethnicity.



Logistic regression analyses found that the following tended to be associated with believing that menthols are less harmful than regular cigarettes:

- Older age (50+) (in 1 out of 3 models)
- Being of Maori (in 2 out of 3 models) or Pacific ethnicity (in all 3 models)
- Reporting financial stress (unable to spend on household essentials) in 1 out of 2 models
- Being a menthol smoker



## Conclusions

**The key finding from this study is that 10% of smokers in a multicultural country, outside of the US, believe that smoking menthols is less harmful than smoking regular cigarettes.**

This misperception is higher amongst Maori, Pacific and menthol smokers. This finding expands the limited United States-based literature on this topic and adds to the argument that governments should regulate all tobacco additives and descriptor content on tobacco packaging so as to protect consumers from misperceptions.

## Acknowledgements

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## References

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