Low-tar and low-nicotine cigarettes? [1]

Alice,

I was wondering if you could tell me what the cigarette with the lowest tar and nicotine is on the market or if there is one with no nicotine?

Thanks,
Mr. Camel

Answer

Dear Mr. Camel,

The short answer to your question is that there are indeed cigarettes with varying levels of tar and nicotine on the market. However, it’s difficult to tell you which cigarettes have the lowest levels of these substances. And, as for your interest in knowing whether there are cigarettes sans nicotine? there aren’t any commercially available nicotine-free cigarettes. Since you brought it up though, you may be interested to know about a few factors that influence tar and nicotine levels in cigarettes and how they impact the health of smokers.

Over the years, there have been a number of adjustments made to cigarettes to manipulate the amount of tar and nicotine in cigarettes, including:

- Filters of various sizes and densities
- Holes to ventilate the cigarettes, thereby diluting the amount of smoke measured
- Putting additives in the paper wrappers or the tobacco itself
- Different types of tobacco

List adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [2].

Though these may change the levels of these substances in cigarettes, there's no scientific evidence to suggest that any of these alterations have resulted in a lower incidence of disease due to smoking. Both Federal regulations and research has shed some additional light on other ways smokers are impacted by the manipulation of these substances.

Time to talk about tar: The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009 [3] (in addition to a number of new regulations) prohibits tobacco manufacturers from labeling their cigarettes as low, light, mild with regard to tar content. It was found that such labeling led consumers to believe that low-tar cigarettes were less harmful, when, in fact,
research does not support this assumption. Though it’s not as clear as it once was to identify low-tar cigarettes, researchers have since identified a number of ways in which packaging has influenced consumers’ inaccurate perception of a “lower-risk” cigarette. Some of these factors include lighter package colors, softer packages, ventilation in the filters, and descriptors such as smooth and silver (which were not included as key terms in the 2009 act). And, even though increased cigarette filter ventilation is the only one of these that can actually lead to lower-tar yield, low-tar cigarettes are not considered less harmful and are not recommended as an alternative to regular or “full-flavor” cigarettes.

On to nicotine: Although a nicotine-free cigarette doesn’t exist, there are a few brands of cigarettes with reduced levels of nicotine on the market. Research on the use of reduced-nicotine content (RNC) cigarettes has aimed to investigate whether they could reduce health risks to smokers and potentially act as a cessation tool.

However, findings from a number of studies are not in exact agreement in these areas. It was initially thought that those using RNC cigarettes would engage in compensatory behavior (i.e., smokers would simply inhale the smoke more deeply and more frequently than they would when smoking a regular cigarette to make up for lower nicotine levels). In turn, it was thought that this type of smoking would also increase exposure to toxicants in smoke (and thus, increase the health risk). A few short-term studies found that a number of participants who smoked RNC cigarettes ended up smoking the same number of cigarettes as their regular cigarette counterparts, and in turn, reduced their overall nicotine consumption. Interestingly, exposure to other toxic substances in cigarettes was not altered. Moreover, of those who did not quit altogether during the study (a few reported spontaneous cessation), some reported that their dependence on nicotine had decreased.

A more recent, longer-term study had slightly dissimilar findings. Initially, all of the participants reported that they were uninterested in quitting. Those in the control group smoked regular cigarettes for 12 months. The experimental group smoked increasingly reduced-nicotine content cigarettes for the same 12 months. After the initial 12 months, both groups were instructed to smoke any cigarettes they wanted for one year. After a two year follow-up, the researchers found that participants in the experimental group were more likely to express interest in quitting than control group. Despite this observation, the experimental group did not experience a decrease in nicotine dependence and exposure levels to toxicants did not change. In fact, the researchers suspected that the participants in the experimental group actually supplemented their RNC cigarette use with regular cigarettes during the study period.

Mr. Camel, it’s unclear what your interest is in cigarettes with lower levels of tar and nicotine. But, if you’re wanting to limit your exposure to these substances, the best way is to avoid cigarettes all together. If you or someone you know is looking to kick their cigarette butts to the curb, there’s a wealth of resources available to help. To learn about what to expect while quitting and get some cessation tips, check out Smoking withdrawal symptoms and how to quit. You might also see whether your school, community, health insurance plan, or workplace offers support such as tobacco cessation counseling and nicotine replacement therapy? both are shown to be effective cessation strategies and are even more effective when used together. Smokefree.gov is another great national resource to help you find even more information and help locally.

Here’s hoping you have no more ifs, ands, or (cigarette) butts about this topic,

Alice!

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