

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

Up in Smoke *The Truth About Tar and Nicotine Ratings*

Why do some smokers choose “low tar” and “light” cigarettes? Because they think these cigarettes may be less harmful to their health than regular cigarettes.

The Federal Trade Commission wants you to know that cigarette tar and nicotine ratings can’t predict the amount of tar and nicotine you get from any particular cigarette. That’s because how you smoke a cigarette can significantly affect the amount of tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide you get from your cigarette. Research indicates that many smokers of “low tar” or “light” cigarettes compensate by taking deeper, longer, or more frequent puffs from their cigarettes. The amount of tar and nicotine a smoker actually gets also can increase if the smoker unintentionally blocks tiny ventilation holes in cigarette filters that are designed to dilute smoke with air.

When it comes to “low tar” and “light” cigarettes, the FTC wants you to know:

- The tar and nicotine numbers used in advertising and on packaging are determined using a smoking machine — a smoking “robot” so to speak — that smokes every brand of cigarette exactly the same way.
- The numbers do not represent the amount of tar and nicotine a particular smoker may get: First, people don’t smoke cigarettes the same way the machine does; second, no two people smoke the same way.
- Many lower tar cigarettes have filters with very small vent holes in the sides that allow air to dilute the smoke in each puff. It’s easy for smokers to cover the holes unknowingly; that results in them getting more tar and nicotine.
- It’s impossible to tell from the ratings the amount of tar and nicotine a smoker will get from any cigarette. Smokers of lower nicotine cigarettes tend to compensate for the lower nicotine by taking deeper and more frequent puffs than they would from a regular cigarette.
- The amount of tar and nicotine smokers actually get depends on how deep and how often they puff on the cigarette and whether they block the vent holes.
- Smoking “low tar” or “light” cigarettes does not eliminate the health risks of smoking. If you’re concerned about the health risks of smoking, stop smoking.

The amount of tar and nicotine you get from your cigarette depends on how you smoke your cigarette. Don’t count on the numbers. There’s no such thing as a safe smoke. For more information, call the FTC toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (382-4357) or visit www.ftc.gov for the Commission’s *1997 Annual Report on Cigarette Advertising*.

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