

Light cigarettes

Many smokers believe that by switching to low tar, low nicotine, 'light' or 'mild' cigarettes they are smoking a less harmful cigarette.¹ Switching from a high tar to a low tar cigarette does not make smoking safer. The word 'light' in light cigarettes is basically a marketing strategy used by tobacco companies to address smokers' health concerns and make cigarettes appear safer.²

Information on cigarette packs about the amount of tar or nicotine is misleading. Some 'full-strength' brands have a declared yield of up to 16 milligrams (mg) of tar, while very low tar cigarettes may declare a yield as low as 1mg of tar. However, when cigarettes are manufactured, a 'smoking' machine measures the tar and nicotine content of a cigarette. In most light cigarettes the tobacco is exactly the same as that in regular cigarettes, but ventilation holes are placed in the filter to draw in up to 80% air when the cigarette is tested on a machine. Smokers under real smoking conditions do not smoke cigarettes in the same way that machines do.²

Nicotine is powerfully addictive (see the fact sheet [Nicotine dependence and withdrawal](#)) and the smoker's brain seeks to ensure a desired level of nicotine is maintained in the blood. Smokers consequently adapt their smoking behaviour to ensure they inhale enough smoke to achieve a satisfactory nicotine 'hit'. When a smoker cuts down the number of cigarettes they smoke, or uses light cigarettes, they're likely to 'compensate' by taking more or deeper puffs, smoking the cigarette further down to the butt, smoking more cigarettes, holding the smoke in their lungs for a longer time, or by unwittingly blocking ventilation holes in the filter of light cigarettes with fingers, saliva or lips having experienced greater 'satisfaction' when doing so. By increasing their intake of nicotine, smokers also take in more tar.^{2,3}



Compensatory smoking means that the inhaled smoke, tar and other cancer-causing chemicals may travel deeper into the smoker's airways and this practice may be associated with an increase in some forms of lung cancer.^{2,3} The risk of lung cancer is not reduced when people smoke medium, low or very low tar cigarettes.³ Tobacco company marketing has historically promoted lower tar cigarettes as an alternative to quitting in the context of health warnings about smoking.⁴ Indeed, one prominent tobacco industry website states 'lower tar cigarettes should be seriously considered as having a role in reducing risks'.⁵ It is a concern for health professionals that some smokers may believe they are reducing their risk of health problems by switching to 'light' cigarettes or by 'cutting down' and therefore may be less likely to make an attempt to quit smoking.¹

It should be remembered that there is no such thing as a 'safe' cigarette or 'safe' smoking. Every cigarette is doing you damage. Even so called 'light' ones. The best thing a smoker can do for their health is to quit smoking for good.

For further information contact:

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If you would like to quit smoking contact the [Quitline 131 848](#) or speak with your doctor or pharmacist. Visit the website: www.quitnow.info.au

References

- 1 Shiffman S, Pillitteri J, Burton S, Rohay J, Gitchell J 2001, *Smokers' beliefs about 'light' and 'Ultra Light' cigarettes*. *Tobacco Control* 10 (Suppl 1): i17-i23.
- 2 Jarvis M, Bates C 1999, 'Why Low Tar Cigarettes Don't Work and How the Tobacco Industry Has Fooled the Smoking Public', *Action on Smoking and Health UK online bulletin*: www.ash.org.uk/html/regulation/html/big-one.html, accessed 28/11/2003.
- 3 Harris JE, Thun MJ, Mondul AM, Calle EE 2004, Cigarette tar yields in relation to mortality from lung cancer in the cancer prevention study II prospective cohort, 1982-8. *British Medical Journal* 328.
- 4 Pollay RW, Dewhirst T 2002, The dark side of marketing seemingly "Light" cigarettes: successful images and failed fact, *Tobacco Control* 11(Suppl 1):i18-i31.