



**ENSP**

European Network  
for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention



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Fighting Tobacco Use  
in Europe

# *Herbal Cigarettes<sup>1</sup> Not as Safe as You Think*

## ***Herbal Cigarettes:***

A type of cigarette that contains a mixture of flowers, herbs, and other natural ingredients. Herbal cigarettes usually do not contain tobacco or nicotine. When they are smoked, they produce many harmful chemicals also found in tobacco smoke, including tar and carbon monoxide.<sup>1</sup>

***“Even when herbal cigarettes don’t contain tobacco, they are dangerous to users health”.<sup>2</sup>***

Herbal and other non-tobacco cigarettes are actively promoted by some manufacturers erroneously to be considered as a safer alternative to smoking, or an aid to quitting smoking.<sup>3</sup> In addition, cigarettes combining herbs and tobacco have been produced in China since 1959, and they are now manufactured in South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.<sup>4</sup> These cigarettes are commonly promoted with messages implying that they are aids in quitting, are less harmful than conventional cigarettes, or with claims for active health benefits such as raising immunity or protecting the kidneys.<sup>5</sup>

Cigarettes that do not contain tobacco or nicotine still produce toxic substances including carcinogens. A 2015 study assessing the safety of mainstream smoke from herbal cigarettes, compared with a generic tobacco cigarette, concluded that some harmful components specifically, tar, carbon monoxide, benzo(α)pyrene, and phenolic compounds including hydroquinone, resorcinol and catechol exist in the mainstream smoke of herbal cigarettes in large amounts similar to a tobacco cigarette.<sup>6</sup> Although tobacco-specific components such as nicotine and nitrosamines were not detected, the study showed smoke condensates of herbal cigarettes have mutagenic potential similar to that of tobacco cigarettes arising from combustion of the product.<sup>7</sup>



## ***“Toxic components also exist in the mainstream smoke of herbal cigarette in large amounts similar to the general cigarette”.***

A study examined the DNA damage response arising from exposure of human lung cells to smoke from tobacco- and nicotine-free cigarettes (made from lettuce and herbal extracts). This exposure led to the formation of double-strand DNA breaks that are potentially carcinogenic and there was a dose–response relationship between exposure to the smoke and the severity of ensuing DNA damage response. The study concluded that smoking nicotine-free cigarettes are at least as hazardous as smoking cigarettes containing tobacco and nicotine.<sup>8</sup>

An analysis of ‘vegetable-based cigarettes’ manufactured in France and sold in Austria were found to yield levels of carbon monoxide at least as high as those produced by conventional cigarettes. Analysis of other constituents of the smoke was not made, although another initial study had shown that combustion may have produced carcinogens and other noxious chemicals.<sup>9</sup> Research of ‘non-nicotine, non-tar’ herbal cigarettes popular in the Philippines has also shown significant yields of tar and carbon monoxide.<sup>10</sup> Smokers attempting to use herbal cigarettes as an adjunct to quitting are therefore exposing themselves to dangerous tar and carbon monoxide levels, without actually increasing their chance of quitting.<sup>11</sup>



## ***"There's no such thing as a safe smoke."***

"Many people assume that anything herbal or natural isn't dangerous, and that's not true,".

In the European Union countries the sale and use of these products must comply with a series of rules established by Tobacco Product Directive (TPD) 2014/40/EU and approved by the EU countries. Art 21 of the TPD clearly describes under which conditions and requirements, herbal cigarettes can reach the market.

### **Specifically it is mentioned that:**

- 1** Each unit packet and any outside packaging of herbal products for smoking shall carry the following health warning: ‘Smoking this product damages your health.’
- 2** The health warning shall be printed on the front and back external surface of the unit packet and on any outside packaging.
- 3** The health warning shall comply with the requirements set out in Article 9(4). It shall cover 30 % of the area of the corresponding surface of the unit packet and of any outside packaging. That proportion shall be increased to 32 % for Member States with two official languages and to 35 % for Member States with more than two official languages.
- 4** Unit packets and any outside packaging of herbal products for smoking shall not include any of the elements or features set out in Article 13(1)(a), (b) and (d) and shall not state that the product is free of additives or flavourings.<sup>12</sup>





### **In addition, TPD Article 22 stipulates that:**

- 1** *Member States shall require manufacturers and importers of herbal products for smoking to submit to their competent authorities a list of all ingredients, and quantities thereof that are used in the manufacture of such products by brand name and type. Manufacturers or importers shall also inform the competent authorities of the Member States concerned when the composition of a product is modified in a way that affects the information submitted pursuant to this Article. The information required under this Article shall be submitted prior to the placing on the market of a new or modified herbal product for smoking.*
- 2** *Member States shall ensure that the information submitted in accordance with paragraph 1 is made publicly available on a website. The Member States shall take the need to protect trade secrets duly into account when making that information publicly available. Economic operators shall specify exactly which information they consider to constitute a trade secret.*

### **ENSP Recommendations:**

- Regular monitoring of herbal products for smoking at EU Member States level but also at European Union level.
- Raise awareness to the general population on the safety issues regarding the herbal products for smoking.
- Reinforce the importance of complete abstinence from tobacco or herbal products as there are no safe smoking products.
- Highlight the need for smoking cessation support and for more scientific evidence to their effect on smokers health.
- Products with specific flavour such as herbal products may also lead to smoking or dual use.
- Smoke remains smoke whether it is tobacco smoking or any other type of smoke and it is very harmful  
Therefore, there is nothing safer than quitting all types of smoking.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> NCI dictionary
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancer-causes/tobacco-and-cancer/is-any-type-of-smoking-safe.html>
- <sup>3</sup> Honeyrose. Honeyrose products: Perfectly natural products. 2007. Available from: <https://honeyrose.co.uk/>
- <sup>4</sup> Chen A, Glantz S, and Tong E. Asian herbal-tobacco cigarettes: "Not medicine but less harmful"? Tobacco Control, 2007; 16(2):e3. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2598477/>
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- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.tobaccoinaustralia.org.au/chapter-3-health-effects/3-32-health-effects-of-smoking-other-substances>
- <sup>12</sup> Tobacco Product Directive TPD  
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