Myths vs. realities

Following are some common myths - and the real truth - about the fire-safe cigarette issue. Some of the arguments below have been used by the tobacco industry as a "smokescreen" to divert attention away from the fact that fire-safe cigarettes can be a highly effective tool in our fight to save lives and prevent injuries and devastation from cigarette-ignited fires. (Courtesy of the National Association of State Fire Marshals)

**MYTH:** The push for fire-safe (lower ignition strength) cigarettes is just an anti-smoking campaign.

**FACT:** The Coalition for Fire-Safe Cigarettes is concerned about fire safety, and preventing deaths and injuries from cigarette-ignited fires. This is not about getting people to stop smoking or to smoke less. This is about making sure that the cigarettes that are smoked are less likely to cause fires.

**MYTH:** There is no such thing as a cigarette that reduces the risk of fire.

**FACT:** Research by the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH), funded by the American Legacy Foundation, indicates several benefits of implementing the New York regulation. "Fire Safer" Cigarettes: The Effect of the New York State Cigarette Fire Safety Standard on Ignition Propensity, Smoke Toxicity and the Consumer Market compared the physical properties of cigarettes sold in New York with cigarettes of the same brands sold in Massachusetts and California. The report found that New York cigarettes were far less likely to exhibit full length burns (only 10 percent) than those of the other states (99.8 percent). The HSPH researchers found no valid reason why cigarette manufacturers should not sell lower ignition strength cigarettes nationwide. The Harvard study confirmed the 20-year-old conclusion of the Federal Technical Study Group on Cigarette and Little Cigar Fire Safety. This group, created by the Cigarette Fire Safety Act of 1984 (Public Law 98-567), concluded that it was technically feasible to develop cigarettes with a reduced propensity to ignite upholstered furniture and mattresses. As the Harvard study makes clear, the federal study was correct, and the tobacco industry can make reduced ignition strength cigarettes if it chooses to do so or is required to do so.

**MYTH:** Fire safe cigarettes are more toxic.

**FACT:** There is no evidence that reduced ignition propensity cigarettes are any more harmful to health. A report by RJ Reynolds conducted in 1993 compared the tar per cigarette in prototype low-ignition propensity cigarettes. The report concludes: "Ames assay results were not higher for the prototype cigarettes than their respective controls, either on a revertant-per-mg-tar basis or a revertant-per-cigarette basis."

The Harvard School of Public Health study also showed there were no substantial differences in toxicity when key indicators were measured for fire-safe cigarettes and their conventional counterparts. The report states, "The majority of smoke toxic compounds (14) tested were not different between New York and Massachusetts brands. Five compounds were slightly higher in New York brands. There is no evidence that these increases affect the already highly toxic nature of cigarette smoke." The research found the majority of toxic compounds were no different between the smoke of the New York and Massachusetts brands that were tested. Five compounds were slightly higher, but no evidence exists that the small increases affect the already highly toxic nature of cigarette smoke. In addition, The New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control (OFPC), which developed the New York State lower ignition strength cigarette regulation, consulted with the New York State Department of Health to consider whether cigarettes manufactured in accordance with the regulation may reasonably result in increased health risks to consumers. The Department of Health advised that cigarettes complying with the fire safety standards set forth in the regulation were not expected to significantly change the inherently high risks associated with cigarette smoking. (This determination was based upon the existing information available on banded cigarettes, the only technology known to OFPC at that time that could feasibly meet the performance standard).
**MYTH:** People will behave carelessly with these fire-safe cigarettes.  
**FACT:** Even tobacco industry documents show that people will remain careful with the new types. A 1991 report of focus groups prepared for RJ Reynolds on consumer behavior with fire-safe cigarettes concludes, "virtually all respondents said they would not alter their current smoking behavior." It goes against common sense to believe that people who have never before been reckless about how they smoke will suddenly become reckless because of a change in what they smoke. The millions of smokers who would like to be safer from fire should be given the tools that exist to save lives.

**MYTH:** We don’t know if this will save a single life.  
**FACT:** Dr. John R. Hall, Jr., of the NFPA Fire Analysis & Research division, estimates that up to 1,000 lives could have been saved each year across the nation if lower ignition strength cigarettes had been required in every state in the mid-1980s when the federal study was released. Today, best estimates are still that most fire deaths involving lighted tobacco products would be prevented by this legislation, which would mean many hundreds of lives saved every year. According to a September 21, 2005, ABC News/Associated Press report, fewer people have died in smoking-related fires since New York became the first state to require that tobacco companies sell self-extinguishing cigarettes.

**MYTH:** The cigarette industry doesn’t know how to make a fire-safe cigarette.  
**FACT:** Chief John Mueller of the New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control, who coordinated promulgation of New York’s rule, told the National Association of State Fire Marshals’ Science Advisory Committee that New York’s goal was to make cigarettes less likely to ignite upholstered furniture or mattresses. New York’s rule resulted in industry’s developing a technically and commercially practical method of designing cigarettes. This has been done, at least in some cases, by using banded paper that interrupts the burning of cigarettes when they are not being actively smoked.

**MYTH:** There isn’t enough of the special paper to implement the fire-safe cigarette laws in more than a few states.  
**FACT:** The cigarette industry has already reworked its practices to produce the lower ignition strength cigarettes for New York. Since the industry is already doing this for New York, making the cigarettes for additional states should be much easier.

**MYTH:** Alcohol and drug abuse are the real problems.  
**FACT:** The mixing of drugs and alcohol with cigarette smoking increases the likelihood of a fatal fire. However, focusing only on behavioral issues and neglecting what can be done to make cigarettes less fire-prone is extremely dangerous. Personal responsibility may be an argument for the smoker who kills himself in one of these fires. But what about the innocent people – children, spouses, parents, visitors – who are killed in fires started by someone else’s careless behavior? According to NFPA, one in four victims is not the smoker whose cigarette ignited the fatal fire. They deserve to be protected, too. We cannot count on the war against drugs and alcohol to solve this problem. Changing human behavior is extremely difficult, but changing the cigarette to make it less likely to ignite a fire is something that cigarette manufacturers know how to do – and they are doing it in New York State. The citizens of every state should be given the same opportunity to avoid being killed in a cigarette-ignited fire.

**MYTH:** The lack of fire sprinklers is the real problem.  
**FACT:** Fire sprinklers in every American home would definitely improve overall fire safety, and is a good way to ensure redundancy of safety measures. However, fire sprinklers extinguish fires once they occur, which means that we have failed to prevent the fire. Smoke alarms are also necessary in homes to alert people when fires do occur, but they do nothing to prevent fires, either. Also, if the cigarette falls near the head of a sleeping smoker, the smoldering fire can produce enough carbon monoxide to kill him or her before there is enough heat from the burning chair/bed to activate the sprinkler.

**MYTH:** An uneducated public is the real problem.  
**FACT:** Local fire departments and other community safety officials do a very good job of informing the public about fire safety. Despite these public safety campaigns, cigarette fire deaths are still far too common. Part of the problem is that even with education, someone who is impaired by alcohol or drug use is less likely to remember a fire safety lesson. And education does not save the innocent victims who are killed in cigarette-ignited fires just because they happened to be in the same residence at the time the fire occurred.
MYTH: Upholstered furniture and mattresses are the real problems.

FACT: Fire safety is about redundancy in safety measures, and cigarettes should not get a free pass. We need to try to prevent fires by addressing ignition sources and fuels, as well as human behavior, and we need to have smoke alarms and sprinklers in place in case our efforts at preventing fires fail. Upholstered furniture and mattresses have had enhanced cigarette resistance for decades, thanks to an industry standard in the first case and an early regulation of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) in the second. There is an active rulemaking within CPSC to make residential upholstered furniture more resistant to open flame and even more resistant to cigarette ignitions. There are also active rulemakings at the CPSC to address open-flame ignitions of mattresses and bedding. But these rulemakings will not be completed for another few years. Even after they are implemented, it may be decades before every American household has fire-resistant furniture and mattresses because these items aren’t purchased on a regular basis. Cigarettes are purchased and used much more quickly than furniture. Lower ignition strength cigarettes can therefore have a positive effect on the fire problem much sooner.

MYTH: Cigarette sales dropped in New York State because of the new law that requires the sale of only fire-safe cigarettes.

FACT: The January 2005 Harvard School of Public Health study shows that no change in per capita cigarette sales occurred in New York when comparing the five months following their regulation compared with the corresponding time period the year before. The report found “New York has experienced no decline in cigarette sales or excise tax payments since the standard went into effect.” A 2.5% drop in cigarette revenue was “found not to be statistically significant when accounting for month-to-month and state-to-state variation.” In addition, because the price was not raised and many consumers have not even noticed the change, any decrease in sales would most likely be attributed to other factors, such as decreased smoking rates.

MYTH: A state legislature should hold off on fire safe legislation.

FACT: This is the classic “deny and delay” strategy that the tobacco industry has used for decades. State legislatures should pass fire safe cigarette legislation so that not one more firefighter, child, grandparent or other innocent bystander or smoker is injured or killed by a preventable fire.

MYTH: A state legislature shouldn’t act because data hasn’t shown how effective the law will be.

FACT: Rigorous design and testing of the test method over two decades correlates the laboratory tests to real-world fires. That’s why New York and Canada approve of the standard. ASTM, the private non-profit standards-setting organization, refined the test developed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology. The tobacco industry participated in the governmental and ASTM processes. It’s common sense: a cigarette that burns to its full length generates more heat and is more likely to cause a fire than one that self extinguishes half way down. Moreover, a January 2005 CNBC segment shown at the joint Senate committee hearing in February 2005, provides a compelling demonstration of the preventative effects of reduced-ignition cigarettes: a fire safe cigarette extinguished in about five minutes; a standard cigarette smoldered for more than two hours before the test upholstered chair burst into flames.

MYTH: This issue can be addressed by a national standard.

FACT: The first national cigarette fire safety law was proposed in the 1970s. There is no basis to believe that Congress is prepared to move cigarette fire safety legislation. Since the last Congressional study came out in 1993, some 10,000 Americans have died as a result of cigarette fires. There’s no reason to believe that national cigarette fire safety legislation is imminent. Until a strong fire safety standard can be enacted by the U.S. Congress, we must pursue regulation at the state level. A federal standard would only be helpful if it is the right standard. The Coalition for Fire-Safe Cigarettes is asking the tobacco companies to step up and do the right thing — replace traditional cigarettes with fire-safe cigarettes. But until that happens, strong state legislation is the best way to prevent fires started by cigarettes. And to avoid a patchwork of standards, the best approach is to adopt the New York State standard, just as California and Vermont have done.
**MYTH:** State laws are unnecessary. The U.S. Congress is about to pass a national law.

**FACT:** Those following Capitol Hill politics understand this argument is a complete myth. Passing legislation in the past few years has been nearly impossible. Bills requiring cigarettes to meet fire safety standards have been introduced in Congress since 1979, and there is still no national law in place. This is in large part because the cigarette industry fights national bills as vigorously as it fights state bills. But the industry always fights state laws by pointing to the existence of federal bills. In fact, state legislation is necessary to put pressure on Congress to pass a national law. The cigarette industry needs to see that it is economically in its best interest to make lower ignition strength cigarettes for the entire nation rather than for just one or two states. The more states that pass these bills, the more likely it will be that the benefit of lower ignition strength cigarettes will be made available to all Americans.

**MYTH:** State cigarette tax revenue will evaporate.

**FACT:** The Harvard School of Public Health researchers reviewed New York tax data for six months after the implementation of the new law. They found the lower ignition strength cigarettes appeared to have no effect on sales of cigarettes in New York. NASFM President and New York State Fire Administrator James A. Burns concurred with the analysis, saying the state has not lost revenue.

**MYTH:** The law discriminates against "mom and pop" retailers.

**FACT:** The New York requirement applies in all retail sales in the state, so there is no discrimination on the size of the retailer. The Harvard School of Public Health study found that cigarette sales in New York have not diminished since the new regulation has taken effect.