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Nicotine is the primary driver of tobacco addiction in the form of cigarettes, vapes and most other forms of commercial tobacco. The greatest health risks arise when tobacco is burned, which generates thousands of toxic substances.

PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES

Movement touts addictive drug as beneficial, but dangers persist

Hasmeena Kathuria
University of Wisconsin-Madison
THE CONVERSATION

An ironic development emerging alongside the "Make America Healthy Again" movement is the portrayal of nicotine as a wellness and performance-enhancing product. Across social media, podcasts, wellness communities and tech startups, prominent wellness personalities and other influencers are portraying nicotine as a misunderstood compound whose potential benefits have been overshadowed by its negative association with cigarette smoking.

As a result, nicotine is being repositioned from an addictive substance linked to tobacco use to a natural product that can be used for everything from improving focus to protecting against cognitive decline. This trend includes use of nicotine alone in noncombustible products such as nicotine pouches, or in combination with caffeine and nootropics, which are substances marketed to enhance cognition.

As a pulmonary physician-scientist who studies nicotine addiction and the health consequences of tobacco and nicotine products, I am concerned about claims that nicotine can enhance wellness, productivity and cognitive performance.



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Distinguishing between nicotine and tobacco

Some of these claims stem from the observation that nicotine is a naturally occurring plant compound found primarily in tobacco and in nightshade vegetables such as tomatoes, potatoes and eggplant in trace amounts. Proponents of nicotine use also draw on studies suggesting that nicotine can affect certain aspects of cognition and brain function.

However, extending these findings to broad claims about productivity, brain health, longevity or wellness goes well beyond what has been shown in human studies.

Nicotine is the primary driver of tobacco addiction in the form of cigarettes, vapes and most other forms of commercial tobacco.

The greatest health risks arise when tobacco is burned, which generates thousands of toxic substances, including carcinogens, carbon monoxide and fine particulate matter. Repeated exposure to these combustion products can cause cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease and numerous other smoking-related illnesses.

While many smoking-related diseases result from exposure to combustion products, nicotine itself has well-known negative effects on the brain and body. Nicotine activates the sympathetic nervous system – the body's "fight or flight" response – which increases heart rate and blood pressure and disrupts sleep. Repeated stimulation of this system can place additional strain on the heart.

Nicotine exposure is of particular concern during critical phases of development. Prenatal exposure to nicotine has been associated with adverse effects on fetal growth and development. Adolescent exposure can alter neural systems involved in attention, learning and reward, increasing vulnerability to addiction.

Nicotine changes the brain

Nicotine also leads to dependence through activation of brain reward pathways.

Acetylcholine is a key neurotransmitter – a chemical messenger in the brain – involved in attention,

See NICOTINE, Page 2A

AI pricing suit raises antitrust questions

Plaintiff says McDonald's used tech to set prices

Mike Scarcella
REUTERS

WASHINGTON – A federal antitrust lawsuit against McDonald's filed last week claims the fast-food giant is using AI-powered tools to fix menu prices, marking the latest case to allege companies are relying on new technologies to collude and harm consumers.

Plaintiffs have sued companies in industries ranging from hotels and real estate to health insurance, and now, hamburgers. The claims are pending in class-action lawsuits around the country, with mixed outcomes so far.

The McDonald's case hinges in part on the company's franchise model, in which most of its 14,000 U.S. restaurants are independently owned. It says restaurant owners should be competing freely but are pressured by McDonald's to use its "pricing engine" or risk losing their franchise status, driving up the cost of Big Macs, fries and other menu items for millions of customers.

McDonald's told Reuters that its franchisees set prices individually, and that "AI does not set the price of a Big Mac or any other menu item."

The lawsuit followed a Reuters report detailing how McDonald's is using AI to guide menu prices. The proposed class action in Chicago federal court says the company leverages its technology "to nickel-and-dime consumers down to the last French fry."

New technology, old laws

Courts are still grappling with how to apply decades-old antitrust laws to AI and other modern software tools that can help companies instantly share and adjust pricing decisions.

There's nothing inherently illegal about using computer algorithms to make business decisions on matters such as pricing, courts have said. However, antitrust law can bar businesses that compete against each other from using such tools to coordinate their decision-making when it raises consumer costs.

New technologies are giving competing companies access and insight into each other's pricing decisions, opening them up to claims that they are coordinating illegally, said antitrust expert Maurice Stucke, who teaches at the University of Tennessee's law school. In many of the pending cases, companies allegedly pooled pricing data using a shared third-party vendor.

"As more companies outsource pricing to an algorithm, you can expect them to have more instances of

See ANTITRUST, Page 2A

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