

The Risks of Tobacco Use:

A Message to Parents and Teens



Many people think tobacco-related health problems affect only adults after a lifetime of smoking or tobacco use. Yet, children and teens suffer from tobacco-related health problems as well. The fact is tobacco use can affect every member of the family.

Infants and children

As a parent, you would never knowingly harm your child. Yet, if you are a smoker, the smoke from your cigarette, cigar, or pipe may be putting your child's health in danger. Environmental tobacco smoke, or ETS, is the smoke that is breathed out by a smoker. ETS also includes the smoke that comes from a burning cigarette, cigar, or pipe.

Exposure to ETS is a serious health threat to children. Children exposed to ETS have a greater risk of many health problems including:

- upper respiratory tract infections
- ear infections
- pneumonia
- bronchitis
- asthma
- long-term lung damage

Smoking and ETS are also dangerous to pregnant women and their unborn babies. They have been linked to low birth weight, delayed growth, miscarriage, and stillbirth. Recent studies have found that infants are at greater risk of dying from SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) if exposed to ETS or if their mother was exposed to ETS during pregnancy.

For more information on ETS, ask your pediatrician about the brochure, *Environmental Tobacco Smoke: A Danger to Children* from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Teenagers

Ninety percent of all smokers begin the habit during their teens. Over the past 10 years, the number of smokers has decreased in every age-group except teenagers. Among teens, the number of young women smokers has actually increased. Teenage smokers suffer from:

- addiction to nicotine
- long-term cough
- faster heart rate
- decreased lung function
- increased blood pressure
- decreased stamina
- increased risk of developing lung cancer
- increased respiratory tract infection

Smoking is a lifelong addiction that is often hard to break. It may also lead to other addictions and a poorer quality of life. Fighting the influence of the tobacco companies and convincing children not to use tobacco products is a tough task. Parents need to give teenagers the facts about the negative effects of smoking.

Smoking and the media

A big influence on a teen's decision to smoke is the media. Young people today are surrounded by images in the media that smoking is normal, desirable, and harmless. Tobacco companies spend billions of dollars every year promoting their products on TV, in movies and magazines, on billboards, and at sporting events. In fact, tobacco products are among the most advertised products in the nation. The tobacco companies hope to get back the profits they lose as older smokers die and as more and more adults quit smoking. As a result, young people are the primary targets of many of these ads.

Tobacco companies and advertisers never mention the harmful effects of smoking, such as bad breath, stained teeth, heart disease, and cancer. Most ads show smokers as healthy, energetic, sexy, and successful. Help your teenager understand the difference between these misleading messages in advertising and the truth about the dangers of smoking.

What parents can do:

- If you smoke or use tobacco, quit. Your actions will influence your child's behavior too.
- Talk about ads with your children. Help them to understand the real messages being conveyed.
- Teach your kids to be wary consumers.
- Make sure the TV shows and movies your child watches do not normalize or glamorize the use of tobacco.
- Do not allow your child to wear T-shirts, jackets, or hats that promote tobacco products.
- Talk to administrators at your teen's school about starting a media education program.

Adults

Smoking is the most preventable cause of death and disability in the United States. Consider the following facts:

- In this country, 350,000 deaths a year are related to tobacco use.
- One third of all deaths from cancer and heart disease are caused by smoking, chewing tobacco, or snuff.
- Three fourths of the deaths from chronic lung disease are related to tobacco.
- A nonsmoking spouse of a smoker has a 30% greater risk of lung cancer. This alone accounts for 2,000 deaths a year.
- Teenagers whose parents smoke are twice as likely to start smoking than children of nonsmokers.
- In 1964, 55% of adult Americans smoked cigarettes. By 1993, this percentage decreased to 25%. This shows that thousands of Americans have found a way to stop smoking. By doing so, they will live longer, feel better, and improve the health of their families.

Smokeless tobacco: not a safe choice!

The term "smokeless tobacco" refers to both chewing tobacco and snuff (also called "dip"). Chewing tobacco is a form of leaf tobacco. Snuff is finely ground tobacco. Both products lead to nicotine addiction because the nicotine is absorbed into the bloodstream. Smokeless tobacco products damage the lining of the mouth and throat and may cause mouth cancer, throat cancer, and gum disease.

Use of smokeless tobacco products also results in:

- stained teeth
- bad breath
- slow healing of mouth wounds
- lowered sense of taste and smell.

Tobacco companies have increased their advertising programs to promote smokeless tobacco products. Famous athletes often endorse these products, making them seem even more appealing to teenagers. As a result, the number of teenagers and young adults who are chewing tobacco is increasing. Parents need to oppose the use of smokeless tobacco. Inform your children of the serious side effects of its use. The facts on the health risks from smokeless tobacco make one thing very clear: IT IS NOT A SAFE CHOICE!

Break the habit

Would you like to join the growing numbers who have quit using tobacco? Have you tried in the past and failed, but would now like to try again? Why not ask your doctor for help? Your doctor may be just the person to help you find an effective stop-smoking program. For more information, contact any of the following organizations:

American Cancer Society:
1-800/ACS-2345

Web site: www.cancer.org

American Heart Association:
1-800/242-8721

Web site: www.americanheart.org

American Lung Association:
1-800/586-4872

Web site: www.lungusa.org

Your pediatrician understands that good communication between parents and children is one of the best ways to prevent drug use. If talking with your child about tobacco use is difficult, your pediatrician may be able to help open the lines of communication. If you suspect your child is smoking cigarettes or cigars, chewing tobacco, or using any other drug, rely on your pediatrician for advice and help.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



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The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 60,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

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