

Comprehensive Family Care Center
Family Practice and Obstetrics

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Smoking - The Facts

Cigarette smoking is the greatest single cause of illness and premature death in the US. This leaflet gives reasons why smoking is so harmful. It also lists the benefits of stopping, and where to go for help.

Some initial facts and figures

- About 120,000 people in the US die each year due to smoking.
- Half of all smokers die from smoking related diseases.
- If you are a long-term smoker, your life expectancy, on average, is about 8-12 years less than a non-smoker. Put another way, in the US about 8 in 10 non-smokers live past the age of 70, but only about half of long-term smokers live past 70.
- If you smoke, it is not just that you are likely to die earlier. You can also expect several years of illness before you die. Smoking-related diseases such as emphysema, chronic bronchitis, and heart disease can cause unpleasant symptoms for several years before death.

The good news is:

- Stopping smoking can make a big difference to your health. It is never too late to stop smoking to gain substantial health benefits. For example, if you stop smoking in middle age, before having cancer or some other serious disease, you avoid most of the increased risk of death due to smoking.
- Many people have given up smoking. In 1972 just under half of adults in the US were smokers. By 1990 this had fallen to just under a third. At present, just over a quarter of US adults are smokers.
- Help is available if you want to stop smoking.

Cigarette smoke contains the following

- **Nicotine** - a drug that stimulates the brain. If you are a regular smoker, when the blood level of nicotine falls, you usually develop withdrawal symptoms such as craving, anxiety, restlessness, headaches, irritability, hunger, difficulty with concentration, or just feeling awful. The next cigarette relieves these symptoms. So, most smokers need to

smoke regularly to feel 'normal', and to prevent withdrawal symptoms.

- **Tar** - which deposits on the lungs, and can cause lung diseases.
- **Carbon monoxide** - and other poisonous chemicals, which get into the bloodstream. They can damage various parts of the body, such as blood vessels.

Which diseases are caused by smoking?

- **Lung cancer.** About 30,000 people in the US die from lung cancer each year. More than 8 in 10 cases are directly related to smoking.
- **Chronic bronchitis / emphysema (also called chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or COPD).** About 25,000 people in the US die each year from this serious lung disease. More than 8 in 10 of these deaths are directly linked to smoking. People with COPD are usually quite unwell for several years prior to death.
- **Heart disease** is the biggest killer illness in the US. About 130-140,000 people in the US die each year from heart disease. About 1 in 7 of these deaths are due to smoking.
- **Other cancers** - of the mouth, nose, throat, larynx, esophagus, pancreas, bladder, cervix, blood (leukemia), and kidney are all more common in smokers.
- **Circulation.** The chemicals in tobacco can damage the lining of the blood vessels. This increases the risk of atheroma forming (sometimes called 'hardening' of the arteries). Atheroma is the main cause of heart disease. It is also the main cause of strokes, peripheral vascular disease (poor circulation of the legs), and aneurysms (swollen arteries which can burst causing internal bleeding). All of these atheroma related diseases are more common in smokers.
- **Chest and throat infections** are more common in smokers.
- **Sexual problems.** Smokers are more likely than non-smokers to become impotent or have difficulty in maintaining erections in middle life. This is thought to be due to smoking related damage of the blood vessels to the penis.
- **Skin.** Smokers tend to develop more 'lines' on their face at an earlier age than non-smokers. (This makes you look older than you are.)
- **Other illnesses** such as asthma, other lung diseases, duodenal ulcers, Raynaud's phenomenon, and osteoporosis are made worse by smoking.

How does smoking affect other people?

- **Children and babies** who live in a home where there is a smoker:
 - Are more prone to ear, nose and chest infections. About 17,000 children under 5 years old in England and Wales are admitted to hospital each year due to illnesses caused by their parents smoking.
 - Have an increased risk of dying from cot death (sudden infant death syndrome).
 - Are more likely than average to become smokers themselves when older.
- **Passive smoking.** You have an increased risk of lung cancer and heart disease if you are exposed to other people smoking for long periods of time. Tobacco smoke is also an irritant, and can make asthma and other conditions worse.
- **Unborn babies.** If you smoke when you are pregnant, it reduces the amount of oxygen that crosses the placenta to the baby. Smokers have an increased risk of miscarriage, or having a low birth weight or premature baby. Premature and low birth weight babies are

more prone to illness and infections.

Other problems with smoking

- Your breath, clothes, hair, skin, and home smells of stale tobacco. You do not notice the smell if you smoke, but to non-smokers the smell is usually obvious.
- Your sense of taste and smell are dulled, and your enjoyment of food and drink may be reduced.
- Life insurance is more expensive.
- Finding a job may be more difficult as employers know that smokers are more likely to have sick leave than non-smokers. More than 34 million working days (1% of total) are lost each year because of smoking related sick leave.
- Potential friendships and romances may be at risk. (Smoking is not the attractive thing that cigarette advertisers portray.)
- Smoking is expensive.

What are the benefits of stopping smoking?

The benefits of stopping begin straight away. You reduce your risk of getting serious disease no matter what age you give up. However, the sooner you stop smoking, the greater the reduction in your risk.

- If you have smoked from being a teenager or young adult:
 - If you stop smoking before the age of about 35, your life expectancy is only slightly less than people who have never smoked.
 - If you stop smoking before the age of 50, you decrease the risk of dying from smoking-related diseases by 50%.
- But it is never too late to stop smoking to gain health benefits. Even if you already have COPD or heart disease, your outlook (prognosis) is much improved if you stop smoking.
- Other benefits of stopping smoking include the following
 - Breathing improves.
 - Chest infections and colds become less frequent.
 - Reduction in 'smoker's cough'.
 - The smell of stale tobacco on clothes, hair, breath, and face goes.
 - Foods and drinks taste and smell much better.
 - Finances improve immediately. You will save over £1000 per year if you smoked 20 a day.
 - You are likely to feel good about yourself.

How can I stop smoking?

Most smokers want to stop smoking. About 1 in 3 smokers intend to give up within a year. Some people can give up easily. Willpower and determination are the most important aspects when giving up smoking. However, nicotine is a drug of addiction and many people find giving up a struggle. Help is available.

- Your doctor can provide advice, help, information, encouragement, and tips on stopping smoking.
- Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) can help if withdrawal symptoms are troublesome. Nicotine gum, sprays, patches, tablets, lozenges, and inhalers are available. Using one of these roughly doubles your chance of stopping smoking if you really want to stop. A pharmacist, GP, or practice nurse can advise about NRT.
- A medicine called bupropion (trade name 'Zyban') is another option. It also roughly doubles your chance of stopping smoking if you really want to stop. It helps to reduce the symptoms of nicotine withdrawal. Your doctor may advise it if you are determined to stop smoking, but are finding it difficult.