National Institute on Aging

Age Page

Smoking: It's Never Too Late to Stop

"I've smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for 40 years—what's the use of quitting now?"

At any age there are many reasons to stop smoking. Some of the benefits for older people include:

- Reduced risk of cancer and lung disease
- Healthier heart and lungs
- Improved blood circulation
- Better health for nonsmoking family members, particularly children.

Smoking doesn't just cut a few years off the end of each smoker's life—it prematurely kills 390,000 people each year and seriously disables millions of others.

What Smoking Does

Cigarette smoke affects a smoker's lungs and air passages, causing irritation, inflammation, and excess production of mucus. These smoking effects can result in a chronic cough and, in more severe cases, the lung disease known as chronic bronchitis. Long-term lung damage can lead to emphysema, which prevents normal breathing.

Smoking, high blood pressure (HBP), and high blood cholesterol (a fatty substance in the blood) are major factors that contribute to coronary heart disease. A person with HBP or high cholesterol who also smokes has a much greater risk of heart attack than a person who has only one of these risk factors.

When a person stops smoking, the benefits to the heart and circulatory system begin right away. The risk of heart attack, stroke, and other circulatory diseases drops. Circulation of blood to the hands and feet improves. Although quitting smoking won't reverse chronic lung damage, it may slow the disease and help retain existing lung function.

Smoking causes several types of cancer, including those of the lungs, mouth, larynx, and esophagus. It also plays a role in cancers of the pancreas, kidney, and bladder. A smoker's risk of cancer depends in part on the number of cigarettes smoked, the number of years of smoking, and how deeply the smoke is inhaled. After a smoker quits, the risk of smoking-related cancer begins to decline and within a decade the risk is reduced to that of a nonsmoker.

Smokers have a higher risk than nonsmokers of getting influenza, pneumonia, and other respiratory conditions such as colds. Influenza and pneumonia can be life-threatening in older people.

One woman in four over age 60 develops osteoporosis, a bone-thinning disorder that leads to fractures. There is evidence that cigarette smoking may increase the risk of developing this disabling condition.

Passive Smoking

There is growing evidence about the harmful effects of secondhand tobacco

smoke on the health of nonsmokers. This should be an especially important concern if the husband or wife of a smoker has asthma, another lung condition, or heart disease. In addition, smoke in the home poses a health hazard for babies and young children. Passive smoking (exposure to another's smoke) by nonsmokers has been linked to a higher incidence of bronchitis, pneumonia, asthma, and inner ear infections in children. This is a good reason for a parent or grandparent to consider quitting or to avoid smoking while in the presence of young children and infants. New studies report that passive smoking increases the nonsmoker's risk for cancer.

How To Stop Smoking

Over 30 million Americans have been able to quit smoking, and recent surveys suggest that this decline in smoking is continuing. By giving up cigarettes, you can be healthier and feel healthier, regardless of how many years or how many cigarettes you have smoked.

There are many ways to stop smoking. No single method works for everyone, so each person must try to find what works best. Many people can stop on their own, but others need help from doctors, clinics, or organized groups. Some studies have found that older people who take part in programs to stop smoking have higher success rates than younger ones do.

Withdrawal symptoms reported by some people who quit smoking include anxiety, restlessness, drowsiness, difficulty concentrating, and digestive problems. Some people have no withdrawal symptoms at all.

Nicotine chewing gum can be prescribed by a physician to help people who are dependent on nicotine (a substance present in tobacco) overcome withdrawal symptoms. When prescribing the gum, many doctors also recommend joining an organized support group or using self-help materials to assist in quitting smoking. Nicotine chewing gum is not recommended for people who have certain forms of heart disease. Denture wearers may find it difficult to chew.

Where To Get Help

Organizations, doctors, and clinics offering stop-smoking programs are listed in telephone books under "Smokers' Treatment and Information Centers." Further information can be obtained from organizations such as the American Cancer Society, 1599 Clifton Road, Atlanta, GA 30329; the American Heart Association, 7320 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231; and the American Lung Association, 1740 Broadway, P.O. Box 596, New York, NY 10019-4374. For all three organizations, consult your local telephone directory for listings of local chapters.

The Office on Smoking and Health collects and distributes information on health risks associated with smoking and methods for quitting. Write to the OSH at 5600 Fishers Lane, Park Building, Room 1-10, Rockville, MD 20857.

You may also contact the Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, MD 20892. Or call the Cancer Information Service at (800) 4-CANCER.

The National Institute on Aging offers a variety of information on health and aging. Write to the NIA Information Center, P.O. Box 8057, Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057.

1991

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