
The Risks of Tobacco Use: A Message to Teens and Parents

Guidelines for Parents from the American Academy of Pediatrics

When many people think of tobacco-related health problems, they think only of adults and the problems of long-term smoking. Yet research now shows that children and adolescents suffer from serious tobacco-related health problems as well. Parents need to look at the facts about tobacco use and how it affects every member of the family; the infant and young child, the teenager, and the adult tobacco user.

Infants and children

As parents, you would not knowingly harm your children. Yet, if you smoke around your children, the smoke from your cigarette, called ETS (environmental tobacco smoke), is harmful to them. Compared to infants and children of nonsmokers, children exposed to high levels of ETS have a much higher risk of upper respiratory infection, pneumonia, bronchitis, asthma, reduced hearing (middle-ear effusion) and ear infections.

Children of smokers are at a higher risk of long-term lung damage. Exposure to the smoke from as few as 10 cigarettes a day increases the risk of getting asthma. Smoking also is a serious health problem for pregnant women and their unborn infants. It has been linked to low birth weight, delayed growth, miscarriage, and stillbirth. Recent studies have found that newborns are at greater risk of dying from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) if a pregnant woman smokes or exposes her newborn to ETS. There is no question that exposure to ETS is a serious health threat to children.

Teenagers

Teenagers are strongly influenced by social pressure, how they see themselves, and how they want others to see them. In this country, advertisers spend \$2.5 billion a year on tobacco ads. Many of these ads are aimed at teenagers. It is no wonder then that 90% 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 that of teenagers. In this group, the number of young women smokers has actually increased.

Tobacco ads make people think that if they smoke they will become more attractive, sexy, strong, adventurous, and worldly. What the teenage smoker really gets is: addicted to nicotine, bad breath, stained teeth, long-term cough, rapid heart rate, decreased lung function, increased blood pressure, decreased athletic ability, and increased risk of developing lung cancer and heart disease. Smoking is a lifelong addiction that is extremely hard to break. It also may lead to a poorer quality of life. This is true for both the smoker and for those who share that smoker's home.

Smokeless tobacco: not a safe choice!

The term "smokeless tobacco", refers to both chewing tobacco and snuff. 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. Tobacco products damage the lining of the mouth and throat and 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 and lowered sense of taste and smell.

The Risks of Tobacco Use (continued)

Tobacco companies have increased their advertising programs to promote smokeless tobacco products. Athletes have even endorsed these products, making them seem even more appealing to teenagers. As a result, the number of teenager and young adults who are chewing and dipping 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!

Fighting the influence of the tobacco companies and convincing children not to use tobacco products is a tough task. Doctors and parents need to give teenagers the facts about the effects of smoking. Smoking is the largest single preventable cause of death and disability in the United States. The facts are sad and serious.

Most adult smokers are aware of the ill effects of smoking, and many would like to break the habit. Consider the followings data: In this country, 350,000 deaths related to tobacco use occur each year. One third of all deaths from cancer and heart disease are caused by tobacco use. Three-fourths of the deaths from chronic lung disease are related to tobacco. The nonsmoking spouse of a smoker has a 30% greater risk of lung cancer.

Thousands of Americans have found a way to stop smoking. Those who do will live longer, feel better, and improve the health of their families. Would you or someone you love like to join the growing numbers who have quit using tobacco? Have previous attempts resulted in failure? Your doctor may be just the person to help you find an effective stop-smoking program.