

Let's Clear the Air: Straight Talk About Teenagers and Smoking

Everyone knows cigarettes and smoking are bad for you, but many teenagers ask, "How bad?" Here is what really happens when you smoke:

The first time

Here is what happens when you smoke a cigarette for the first time:

- Your heart beats faster and has to work harder.
- Your breath smells bad.
- It is likely you will start coughing.
- You may feel dizzy.
- You may get in trouble with parents or at school.

After a while

Here is what happens when you smoke regularly:

- You become addicted to nicotine. If you smoke only a few cigarettes every day for a week, you can get hooked. Your body physically needs a cigarette to feel okay.
- It is harder to breathe. You can't perform as well in sports, and you are more likely to get infections in your lungs.
- You smell bad.
- Your teeth start turning yellow.
- You have less money. Being addicted to cigarettes is expensive!

After a long time

Here is what can happen if you smoke for a long period of time:

- Lung cancer and other cancers: When you start to smoke before you are fifteen years old, you have a four times greater chance of getting lung cancer (almost everyone who gets lung cancer has smoked cigarettes).
- Heart disease: Smokers have more heart attacks.
- Lung disease: Smokers get other lung diseases, like emphysema. Some of these diseases can kill you.
- Wrinkles: Smoking causes the skin on your face to wrinkle.
- Death: As long as you smoke, each cigarette takes ten minutes off your life.

If smoking is so bad for you, why do teenagers do it?

Teenagers start smoking for different reasons:

- Because their friends smoke
- To look cool or sophisticated
- Rebellion

They keep smoking because they are *addicted*.

Is it bad to be around people who smoke even if you don't?

Yes. Secondhand or passive smoke (smoke from other people's cigarettes) increases your chance of getting cancer and lung diseases. The risk of death from lung cancer and heart disease is increased 30% among those regularly exposed to secondhand smoke at home.

I've heard that if you chew tobacco it is not dangerous.

Wrong. Smokeless tobacco (chew, dip, snuff) still contains nicotine, so you can become addicted just as with smoking cigarettes. Here are some problems associated with smokeless tobacco:

- Bad breath
- Stained teeth
- Cancer: You can get cancer of the mouth, gums, larynx (voice box), and esophagus.
- Addiction

If you are already smoking, does it help to quit?

Yes. This is the good news: when you quit, your lungs begin to repair themselves very soon. After a while, your risk of having a heart attack or getting lung cancer or other respiratory diseases goes way down.

When you quit, your breath smells good, your teeth get white again, and you have more money to spend on things other than cigarettes. You also feel good about yourself because you accomplished a difficult thing that you wanted to do.