



Tobacco and Cancer



Basic description

Tobacco use, the most preventable cause of death in our society, accounts for at least 30% of all cancer deaths. In the United States, tobacco use is responsible for nearly 1 in 5 deaths. About half of the people who continue to smoke will die prematurely from smoking-related diseases. Another estimated 8.6 million people suffer from chronic health problems related to smoking, such as chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and cardiovascular diseases.

Cancers affected

Smoking causes at least 80% of lung cancer deaths. The risk of getting lung cancer is about 23 times higher in male smokers and 13 times higher in female smokers, compared with people who have never smoked. The risk of lung cancer is just as high in smokers of “light” and “low-tar” cigarettes as in those who smoke regular cigarettes.

Tobacco use increases the risk of many types of cancer, including cancer of the nasal cavity and paranasal sinuses, nasopharynx, lip, oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, lung, esophagus, pancreas, cervix, ovary, kidney, bladder, stomach, and colorectum, as well as acute myeloid leukemia.

Oral or smokeless tobacco products, pipe tobacco, and cigars also cause cancer. Oral cancer is far more common in snuff users than non-users.

Cigars contain many of the same carcinogens that are found in cigarettes. Regular cigar smoking causes cancer of the lung, larynx, oral cavity, esophagus, and probably also the pancreas. And cigar smokers have 4 to 10 times the risk of dying from cancer of the larynx, mouth, or esophagus, compared to non-smokers.

Each year, secondhand smoke causes about 3,400 lung cancer deaths in non-smoking adults and about 46,000 deaths from heart disease in non-smokers. Exposure to secondhand smoke also causes other health problems, such as respiratory illnesses (like pneumonia or bronchitis), asthma attacks, and heart disease.

Opportunities for risk reduction

Quitting tobacco use greatly decreases the risk of certain cancers, heart disease, stroke, and chronic lung disease. People who quit at any age live longer than people who keep smoking. For example, smokers who quit before the age of 50 cut their risk of dying in the next 15 years in half, compared with those who keep smoking.

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Quitting

The best way to quit using tobacco and stay quit is to use more than one quit approach. Approaches that can help someone quit include:

- Behavioral therapy/counseling
- Nicotine replacement therapy (gum, skin patches, inhaler, spray, or lozenges)
- Non-nicotine prescription medicine (such as bupropion or varenicline)
- Peer support
- Advice from a doctor or other health care provider
- A combination of the therapies listed above

Equally important is the prevention of tobacco use among children and youth. Almost 90% of adults who are regular smokers started at or before the age of 19. And people who start smoking at younger ages are more likely to develop long-term nicotine addiction than people who start later in life. If more children and youth can be prevented from starting, a large number of tobacco-related health problems can be avoided.

Bottom line

Stopping tobacco use, or not ever starting, is the single most important action that can be taken to reduce cancer in the US. If all adults stopped using tobacco and children did not start, about one-third of all cancer deaths could be prevented, billions of dollars would be saved, and millions of family members and friends would avoid the sickness and premature death of a loved one.

Lung cancer in the United States: 2012 estimates

- New cases: 226,160
- Deaths: 160,340
- 5-year relative survival rate for localized stage: 52%
- 5-year relative survival rate for all stages combined: 16%