

Smoking and Older Adults

This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

The CDC reminds those working with older adults about the importance of this group giving up smoking and other tobacco use. About 300,000 smoking-related deaths occur each year among people who are age 65 and older. But, here's the good news. Older smokers who try to quit are almost twice as likely to succeed as younger adults.

CDC notes that tobacco cessation has both immediate and long-term benefits for older adults and there are new techniques to help older adults quit smoking. This is important news because the U.S. Surgeon General has long said that smoking is especially harmful for older adults. And it is not just the older smoker who benefits from cessation. Older adults who quit also reduce secondhand smoke dangers for their spouses, grandchildren, friends, and neighbors. You've heard about smoking bans in restaurants and other public places. Now, advocates for older adults are working to ban smoking in apartment units and other places where older adults live. That will help improve the health of everyone. Exposure to secondhand smoke has immediate adverse effects on the cardiovascular system and causes coronary heart disease and lung cancer. In addition, the Surgeon General has concluded that there is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure.

Quitting smoking has benefits at any age, reducing the risk of disease, including the big three tobacco-related illnesses — heart disease, lung cancer, and stroke. Quitting also can add years of life for older adults. Even for those who are already ill with tobacco-related diseases, quitting reduces mortality, reverses respiratory symptoms, and improves quality of life.

Here are some statistics on the benefits of quitting. A typical smoker who quits after age 65 can add two to three years to his or her life expectancy. Within a year of quitting, former smokers reduce their risk of coronary heart disease by half. Ten years after quitting, cessation reduces the risk of lung cancer by half. Smokers who quit after age 60 have better lung function than their peers who continue to smoke. Smoking cessation markedly reduces the risk of death or a second heart attack in adults already diagnosed with coronary heart disease. Quitting also improves exercise tolerance, reduces the risk of amputation, and increases overall survival.

Older adults are from a generation where quitting often meant going “cold turkey,” or perhaps using nicotine patches or gum, or a drug called Zyban. Now, CDC says, there are even more ways to help an older adult quit their tobacco use.

More and more physicians and health care personnel now know that something as simple as suggesting smoking cessation can encourage an older adult to quit. Telephone quit line programs are operated in all states, and group or one-on-one counseling programs are offered by many physicians and smoking cessation counselors. A counselor will help an older adult improve his or her success rate by developing an individualized plan for quitting. That plan will identify the person's reasons for quitting, their triggers for smoking, and how to respond to an urge to smoke. Medicare will even help pay for some cessation counseling sessions. In addition, older adults

need to know about all of the medication options that can help more than double their chances of successfully quitting.

Let's go over the typical excuses that older adults use for continuing to smoke or use tobacco. We believe you will see that no matter how old someone is, quitting at any age is beneficial.

Excuse Number 1: "Smoking hasn't killed me yet."

Well, according to the U.S. Surgeon General, smoking harms nearly every organ of the body, causing many diseases, and reducing the health of smokers in general. Older smokers are at a greater risk because they generally have smoked for an average of 40 years, are more likely to be heavy smokers, and often already have smoking-related illnesses.

Excuse Number 2: "It's too late; the damage has been done."

Smoking cessation at any age has immediate and long-term benefits, reducing risks for diseases caused by smoking. We've already mentioned the reduction in heart attack risk. For people with cancer, continuing to smoke can decrease the effectiveness of treatment and the prognosis for survival.

Excuse Number 3: "Smoking relaxes me."

Actually, smoking stresses the body as the heart beats faster and blood pressure rises. The relaxation feeling that smokers cite may be due to deep breathing from inhaling, and the fact that people are often taking a break while they smoke. People who want to quit smoking should try taking a break and doing deep breathing to relax without a cigarette.

Excuse Number 4: "If I quit, I'll gain weight."

That's a tough one. Researchers acknowledge that quitting smoking is often followed by weight gain. However, the health risks of gaining a few pounds are considered lower than the risks of continued smoking. In addition, physical activity and a healthy diet can help control weight gain.

Excuse Number 5: "Been there, done that."

It's true that many smokers have to try five or six times before they succeed in quitting. But that doesn't mean they can't succeed, especially if they take advantage of the cessation counseling and medications now available.

We hope this overview of smoking cessation will be helpful in urging older adults to quit their tobacco use. For more information about smoking cessation call 1-800-QUIT-NOW for free quitting help or visit www.smokefree.gov. Thank you for listening!

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