

INFORMATION SHEET

Smoking and Asthma

You will find very definite benefits in your health and the quality of your life, as well as remove the risk of damage to your children's lungs, when you quit smoking.

This Information Sheet is written to remind smokers of the dangers of smoking and the benefits of quitting.

It can be done.

It is never too late.

The dangers of cigarette smoke

Cigarette smoke contains many substances that can damage the lungs.

The smoke has two parts: tiny solid pieces containing tar, and the gas, which contains carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides and other toxins including the addictive chemical, nicotine. Smoking takes these poisonous substances directly into your lungs.

The tar in cigarette smoke damages cells in the airways of your lungs. Eventually this damage can produce cells that grow uncontrollably - leading to cancer of the lung or voice box (*larynx*). In response, your body sends protecting cells to your lungs to try and defend them, but cigarette smoke destroys them. The dead cells then release substances that damage the structure of the lung. This leads to Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).

Cigarette smoke also releases substances into your bloodstream that damage other organs. Arteries in your heart, brain and other places can be affected. This can lead to angina, heart attacks, strokes and poor circulation. It also increases your chances of developing cancer in other areas of the body, such as the gullet or bladder.

Tobacco smoke irritates the airways in the lungs, causing the cells to produce lots of mucus (phlegm). The normal cleaning action of the lung is also affected so that the mucus and other irritants are not removed. This means that smokers and those exposed to cigarette smoke are more prone to chest and throat infections, with an increase in the chance of permanently damaging the airways.

Passive smoking

Passive smoking is breathing in other people's cigarette smoke, both from the burning end of a cigarette and the smoke breathed out by smokers. Smoke from the burning end of a cigarette (sidestream smoke) has not passed through the cigarette filter and contains higher concentrations of chemicals than the mainstream smoke breathed in by the smoker.

Passive smoking often troubles non-smokers, especially if they have asthma or other lung problems.

Pregnancy

If a woman smokes during pregnancy the chemicals in the smoke are passed onto the baby before birth and affect the cells of the lung and the air passages. Maternal smoking during pregnancy has been linked to small unwell babies, higher rate of stillbirth, premature labour, premature birth and

maternal haemorrhage. Smoking has also been linked to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Babies of smokers are more likely to suffer from asthma and respiratory infections than those of non-smokers.

Mothers should not smoke during pregnancy, and other adults should not smoke near expectant mothers, children or in houses where children live.

Childhood

Young children have smaller, more delicate lungs than adults and are therefore more affected by tobacco smoke and the chemicals it contains. A developing lung is hugely sensitive and early damage is often permanent.

Research has shown that children exposed to second-hand smoke after birth are likely to develop respiratory problems such as wheezing, asthma symptoms, worsen pre-existing asthma, or other acute respiratory illness.

Passive smoking is also a significant factor in the development of childhood asthma. When exposed to passive smoking many children develop sensitive airways that make them more susceptible to a number of problems including asthma attacks. International studies have shown that children whose parents smoke have more severe asthma, more frequent exacerbations and impaired lung function.

Many children with asthma live with smokers and are therefore potentially exposed to cigarette smoke in their home. Over 40% of children aged four and under, or one in nine children with asthma (ACAM, 2008) live in a home with at least one smoker. These children are more likely to attend emergency departments with asthma.

Smoking and Asthma

Smoking is dangerous for everyone. If you have asthma, smoking is probably the worst thing you could do. Cigarette smoke contains harmful chemicals that irritate the lungs. People with asthma generally have chronically inflamed lower airways. If you smoke (or breathe in other people's smoke) you can aggravate this inflammation and exacerbate asthma symptoms.

Despite the known additional health risks, just as many people with asthma smoke as people without asthma. Around 40% of children who have asthma are likely to be exposed to passive smoke because they live with smokers.

Compared with non-smokers with asthma, smokers with asthma have

more asthma symptoms

worse asthma control

a more rapid decline in lung function

more airway inflammation

less response to **preventer** medication

If you have asthma and breathe in other people's smoke you increase the risk of an asthma 'attack'. Do not be afraid to ask other people to stop smoking around you.

If you do smoke, try to quit.

The benefits of quitting

By quitting you will not be placing your children at risk of asthma from inhalation of passive household cigarette smoke.

The sooner you quit, the less likely it is that your lungs and other organs will be damaged. Symptoms such as coughing can get better within days or weeks.

If COPD has started to develop, quitting smoking will prevent further damage. Continuing to smoke causes a steady increase in shortness of breath. This limits your activity and increases the risks of lung and heart failure. It is never too late to think about quitting.

The risk of lung cancer increases the more you smoke, and the longer you smoke. Once you quit, the risk of lung cancer starts to go down. After ten years off cigarettes, the risk is halved compared to the risk if you had continued smoking.

Whilst some people go through life unaffected by smoking, millions do not. Too many people think 'It will never happen to me' – until they develop cancer or have their first heart attack.

Quitting

Quitting smoking can be very difficult, but many smokers find it easier than expected. Despite the difficulties, more and more smokers are managing to stop every day. It can be done and you will find very definite benefits in your health and the quality of your life.

Most smokers are addicted to the nicotine in cigarettes. There are many options available to assist you. Talk to your doctor or asthma educator about how nicotine-replacement therapy, counseling and other treatments can help you butt out for good.

Further information

For further information talk to your doctor, or contact

The Asthma Foundation of Victoria on 1800 645 130

www.asthma.org.au

See **Chronic Lung Conditions**

National Asthma Council Australia on 1800 645 130 / www.nationalasthma.org.au

Quit, Victoria. Smoking and asthma, 2006 (brochure).

www.quit.org.au

Quitline on 137 848

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