

WHAT IT IS

Tobacco comes from the leaves of the tobacco plant. It can be rolled or shredded for cigars or cigarettes, or ground into a chewable form. The active ingredient in tobacco is nicotine, an addictive drug. Tobacco also contains over 400 other chemicals.

WHAT IT DOES

Nicotine is both a stimulant and depressant that targets your brain and nervous system.

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

Smoking a cigarette will probably give you a "rush," or a brief feeling of well-being at the time you're smoking. You might feel like you're more relaxed. Socially, smoking may make you seem tough or rebellious to some friends, and may make you feel like you fit in better.

But smoking also causes your breath, hair, and clothes to smell. Smoking regularly will make your teeth yellow, and more susceptible to decay. Smokers usually experience shortness of breath, which is why most young people who are active in sports don't smoke. Plus, nicotine is so addictive that even your first cigarette may put you on the road to addiction.

There's a myth that smoking can help you lose weight, a reason given by many young women for why they started smoking. But studies show that teen smokers don't lose any more weight than non-smokers. Not to mention that losing weight with methods like eating well and exercising doesn't come with side effects like cancer.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Tobacco is the leading preventable cause of death in Canada. Approximately 40,000 Canadians die each year from smoking-related illnesses. One third of all cancers are smoking-related, and lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths. Smoking causes damage to your heart and cardiovascular system, which can lead to heart attacks and strokes.

In addition to nicotine, cigarette smoke is composed of gases (mainly carbon monoxide) and tar. The tar contains carcinogens, or cancer-promoting agents, such as benzopyrene, which irritates your lungs, causing bronchial disease and emphysema. Emphysema is an irreversible damaging of the alveoli, or air sacs, in the lungs. The carbon monoxide in the smoke interferes with the exchange of oxygen in the blood, and increases the chance of cardiovascular disease.

Smoking is also responsible for many fatal home fires, as cigarettes are often accidentally left burning or smouldering.

ENVIRONMENTAL TOBACCO SMOKE (ETS)

Environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) is considered both second-hand smoke (the smoke the smoker exhales), and side-stream smoke (the smoke coming off the end of the cigarette.) ETS can cause lung cancer and respiratory diseases in those breathing it over a long time. Currently, strong efforts are being made to reduce exposure to ETS.

ADDICTION

Nicotine is highly addictive. The initial stimulation you feel when smoking is followed by depression and fatigue, leading the smoker to seek more nicotine.

About one in every five Canadians aged 15 and over smokes. But BC has the lowest rate of smoking in Canada, about 17%. This same percentage is true of BC high school students. This means 83% of teens in school don't light up.

REDUCING THE RISKS

- ◇ If you're offered a cigarette, keep in mind how addictive nicotine is, even the first time you smoke, and how hard it is to quit smoking once you've started.
- ◇ If you don't want to start smoking but aren't sure how to handle situations when you're offered a cigarette, practice your response ahead of time. It might be "No thanks, my girlfriend/boyfriend hates kissing smokers" or "My grandpa died of cancer, and I don't want to push my luck," etc.
- ◇ If you already smoke, one way to begin reducing the risks to your health is by cutting down the number of cigarettes you smoke.

QUITTING

- ◇ If you want to quit smoking, many products are available to help you, including nicotine replacement therapy in the form of skin patches and nicotine gum. These quitting aids usually cost about the same as it would cost to continue buying cigarettes.
- ◇ When you're quitting, think about all the money you'll save, and what you could do with it instead!
- ◇ The good news is, if you succeed in quitting, many of the risks to your health begin to decrease almost immediately.
- ◇ Contact your doctor or other health professional for help. Or you can phone the BC Smokers' Helpline(1-877-455-2233) or Quit 4 Life, BC Lung Association (604-731-3864).

BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW

We're just starting to really see the long-term effects of smoking. The rate of smoking when your parents or grandparents were your age was much higher than it is now. So, many older people who have smoked or still smoke are now suffering serious health effects, which took years to develop.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- ◇ The rate of smoking is less today than 20 or 30 years ago. What could we expect to happen to the rate of cancer and heart disease 20 or 30 years from now?
- ◇ Efforts are being made to eliminate smoking from all places of work.
 - a. Do you agree or disagree with this?
 - b. In what types of workplaces would it be hardest to eliminate smoking?
- ◇ Why do some people say, "Everybody smokes," when they don't?

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