

Want Some Life Saving Advice?

Ask Your Dental Hygienist About Women and Smoking

Prevalence

According to the 2001 U.S. Surgeon General's report on women and smoking, 22% of adult women and 30% of high-school girls were smoking in 1998. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found 20% of American women smoking in 2002, according to *Cigarette Smoking Among Adults—United States, 2002*. But despite evidence of a decline in the number of smokers, more smoking-related diseases are being reported—especially for women, says CDC. As the Surgeon General's report claims, "Women and girls in the United States are in the throes of an epidemic of tobacco-related diseases."

Health Effects

The deleterious health effects of smoking on women are disproportionate to those on men. The Surgeon General has declared smoking to be "the leading known cause of preventable death and disease among women," accounting for the premature deaths of about three million women since 1985. CDC found that women who die of smoking-related illness lose, on average, 14.5 years of life, compared to 13 years for men.

Many of these deaths are attributable to lung cancer, which, while more deadly, gets far less attention than breast cancer, according to an article published by the American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA). One reason for this is that while survivors of breast cancer have banded together in support networks, lung cancer kills too quickly for survivors to develop similar relationships. Another reason is that society stigmatizes people with lung cancer for having brought their condition on themselves.

The resulting lack of attention to the disease contributes to ignorance on the part of women smokers regarding the additional damage smoking can cause. While many know that heart disease and chronic lung disease join lung cancer on the list of smoking-related dangers, fewer are aware of the other cancers smoking can cause (oropharyngeal, bladder) or contribute to (pancreatic, renal, laryngeal, esophageal). It is

not common knowledge that infertility, delayed conception, early and more difficult menopause, osteoporosis, painful menstruation, and sudden infant death syndrome in infants subjected to secondhand smoke have all been linked to women smoking.

Exposure to secondhand smoke has even caused lung cancer in nonsmoking women, says the Surgeon General's report. And while breast cancer may be less deadly than lung cancer, some research shows that it is more likely to metastasize to the lungs in women who smoke than in those who don't.

In addition, research published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* found that women who start smoking within five years of their first menstrual period are more likely than others to develop breast cancer. The health effects on young women are of particular concern given the number of girls still initiating smoking (see box).

Cigarette smoking is frequently portrayed as a tool women use to control their weight in order to be more physically attractive, but what is lost in the bargain is not as often stressed. Whatever cigarettes' appetite-suppressive characteristics, smoking can devastate a woman's attractiveness by staining her teeth, contributing to facial wrinkling, and causing bad breath. Not least of all, smoking contributes to periodontal disease, which can lead to tooth loss and has been linked to serious systemic diseases.

Quitting

Quitting smoking benefits smokers at all stages of life and no matter what health effects they may have already suffered. Women who commit to change and make use of behavioral techniques and social support are more likely to succeed in quitting, says the Surgeon General's report.

Additionally, quitting smoking does not automatically mean gaining weight. An exercise program can reduce or delay weight gain, as well as increase the likelihood of quitting for good, according to the United States Public Health Service.

Your dental hygienist is an excellent source of information about smoking and its effects on your oral and overall health as well as information about quitting. And for more information about proper oral health care, as well as brushing-and-flossing instructions, please ask your registered dental hygienist, or visit www.adha.org.

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Girls & Young Women

A report called *The Formative Years: Pathways to Substance Abuse among Girls and Young Women Ages 8–22* was prepared by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University and published in February 2003. Among its findings were

- **27.7% of girls smoke.**
- **Girls are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, and use drugs during transitions such as moving to a new neighborhood or going to college.**
- **Smoking and drinking were associated with depression and suicide attempts; smoking was associated with dieting.**
- **Girls appeared to become addicted to nicotine even before adopting a regular smoking habit.**
- **Substance abuse can develop more quickly for girls than for boys, and with more deleterious effects.**