

Smoking and heart disease

Smoking is a major cause of cardiovascular disease (heart, stroke and blood vessel disease). Smoking kills more than 15,000 Australians a year (more than 40 Australians each day) and nearly 40 per cent of all deaths from smoking are due to cardiovascular disease.

Smoking damages the heart and blood vessels

The heart relies on a generous supply of oxygen and nutrients from the two coronary arteries and their branches. Over the years, fatty deposits (called plaque or atheroma) can build up inside one or more of the coronary arteries (a process called atherosclerosis). This narrowing of the arteries reduces the flow of blood to the heart and increases the risk of heart attack. Smoking speeds up the clogging and narrowing of coronary arteries.

A heart attack occurs when a blood clot forms at a narrowed point in a coronary artery and suddenly blocks the flow of blood to the heart. If the artery remains blocked, the lack of blood supply permanently damages the area of heart muscle supplied by that artery. The severity of the heart attack depends on how much heart muscle is permanently damaged.

Smoking also speeds up atherosclerosis and damages other blood vessels. This 'peripheral arterial disease' can reduce blood circulation, particularly to your hands and feet, and result in blood clots, gangrene and even amputation.

Some facts about cigarette smoke

Cigarette smoke contains thousands of chemicals including:

- Nicotine – an addictive drug that affects brain and muscle activity and increases your blood pressure, making your heart work harder
- Carbon monoxide – a poisonous gas that replaces oxygen in your blood, making your heart beat faster
- Tar – a sticky substance that coats your lungs like soot in a chimney, making it harder for you to breathe, and that contains dozens of chemicals that cause cancer.

The risks of cigarette smoking

If you smoke, your risk of:

- Heart attack is increased by two to six times
- Coronary heart disease is increased if you are a woman using the contraceptive pill
- Stroke is increased by three times
- Peripheral arterial disease, which can lead to gangrene, is increased by more than five times.

Second-hand smoke is a health hazard

Exposure to second-hand smoke (passive smoking) is a serious health hazard for smokers and non-smokers. People who inhale smoke from others are at increased risk of disease.

- Non-smokers living with smokers have about a 30 per cent increase in risk of heart disease.
- Exposure to second-hand smoke is especially risky for children and babies, and increases the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), bronchitis, pneumonia and asthma.

Quit smoking and improve your health

Within one day of quitting smoking:

- Your heart rate slows down and your blood pressure drops slightly.
- Carbon monoxide is out of your blood.
- Oxygen levels in your blood rise.

Within two to three months:

- Your ability to smell and taste improves.
- Your lungs regain the ability to clean themselves, so you can cough up mucus.
- The blood flow to your hands and feet improves, so they won't get so cold.

Within one year:

- Your risk of heart attack is greatly reduced.
- If you smoked a packet of 25s a day, you would have saved over \$4,500.

Within two to six years:

- Your risk of developing coronary heart disease returns to a similar level as that of a non-smoker.

Where to get help

- The Heart Foundation Tel. 1300 36 27 87
- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- Talk to your family and friends
- Self-help materials and quit smoking courses
- Call the Quitline Tel. 13 7848 (13 QUIT) for information and advice.

Things to remember

- Smoking kills more than 15,000 Australians a year.
- Breathing other people's smoke (second-hand smoke) is harmful to smokers and non-smokers.
- Quitting smoking can be hard at first, but like learning to ride a bike, you can do it with planning, practice and help. Don't give up.
- Every cigarette that you don't smoke is doing you good.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Heart Foundation

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