

Smoking and heart disease

Cigarette smoking is a major cause of heart attack, stroke and peripheral arterial disease. Smoking kills more than 15,000 Australians a year or more than 40 Australians each day. Nearly 40 per cent of all people who die from smoking do so due to heart and blood vessel disease. Tobacco use accounts for a large proportion of heart attacks among younger cigarette smokers.

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 or plaques 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, starving the heart muscle (myocardial) cells of oxygen and nutrients. 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 damages other blood vessels. This can prevent blood circulation, particularly to your hands and feet. Peripheral arterial disease can result in blood clots, infection, gangrene and even amputation.

Some facts about smoking and heart disease

- Tobacco smoke contains more than 4,000 chemicals, many of them known poisons.
- Nicotine increases blood pressure, which makes the heart work harder. Carbon monoxide makes the heart beat faster and takes the place of oxygen in the blood.
- Tar in tobacco contains dozens of chemicals that cause cancer.
- Smokers have a 70 per cent greater risk of death from coronary heart disease than non-smokers.

Cigarette smoking – the risk factors explained

If you smoke you:

- Increase your risk of heart attack by two to six times
- Increase your risk of heart disease if you are a woman using the contraceptive pill
- Increase your risk of stroke by three times
- Increase your risk of peripheral arterial disease, which can lead to gangrene, by more than five times.

Passive smoking is a health hazard

Exposure to secondhand 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 25 to 30 per cent increase in risk of heart disease and are also more likely to suffer a stroke.
- Exposure to secondhand smoke is especially risky for children and babies and may cause low birth weight, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), bronchitis, pneumonia, asthma and middle ear infections.

Most people start smoking in their teens

Despite positive trends in smoking prevalence, many young people continue to experiment with smoking or start smoking regularly.

- The transition from primary to secondary school is a period during which young people are at greatest risk of experimenting with or starting smoking.
- More than 80 per cent of adults who smoke reported feeling addicted to smoking by the time they left secondary school.

Reasons why young people try smoking

There are many reasons why young people try smoking. These include:

- Perceived acceptability of smoking in home and community settings
- Peer and parental smoking
- Availability of cigarettes
- Curiosity
- Belief that there is no risk in trying
- Exposure to the promotion of smoking in movies
- Problems in life, such as difficulties and stress.

Quit smoking and improve your health

Some good reasons to quit now include:

- A smoker's excess risk of heart attack reduces rapidly after only one year of not smoking.
- Within two to six years, the risk of developing coronary heart disease can return to a similar level as that of a non-smoker.
- There are short-term economic and health benefits – if you smoked a packet of 25 cigarettes a day, within one year you will save over \$3650.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Community health centre
- Local pharmacy
- Heart Foundation Tel. 1300 36 27 87
- Quitline Tel. 137 848

Things to remember

- Cigarette smoking is a major cause of heart attack, stroke and peripheral arterial disease.
- Smoking kills more than 19,000 Australians a year.
- Smokers have a 70 per cent greater risk of death from coronary heart disease than non-smokers.
- Non-smokers living with smokers have about a 25 to 30 per cent increase in risk of heart disease and are also more likely to suffer a stroke.
- Quitting smoking has immediate and long-term health and financial benefits.

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

Heart Foundation

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