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Surgeon General's Perspectives

A NEW SURGEON GENERAL'S REPORT: PREVENTING TOBACCO USE AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

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Far too many adolescents and young adults use tobacco, resulting in immediate heart and lung damage from smoking and placing them at risk for a lifetime of addiction to nicotine. While progress has been made in the fight against tobacco use in young people, more than 3.6 million middle and high school students still smoke cigarettes. (This figure was obtained by multiplying the current smoking prevalence in middle and high school [from the 2009 National Youth Tobacco Survey][1] by the number of students enrolled in middle and high school [from U.S. Census 2009][2]). Furthermore, targeted marketing encourages more young people to take up this harmful habit every day. We must reinvigorate our efforts to tackle the immediate and long-term health effects from tobacco use in young people.

In March, I released a new Surgeon General's Report, "Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults." The report examines in detail the epidemiology, health effects, and causes of tobacco use among adolescents (aged 12–17 years) and young adults (aged 18–25 years). Additionally, it highlights effective strategies to prevent young people from using tobacco.[3] Nearly all tobacco use begins during adolescence and young adulthood, and young adults are a prime target for tobacco advertising and marketing activities.

Expenditures for marketing and promotion of tobacco products exceed $1 million an hour—more than $27 million a day—in the United States alone.[4,5] These targeted messages and images portray smoking as an acceptable, appealing activity for young people. Advertising for tobacco products is prominent in retail stores, and new products have emerged that young adults, teens, and even younger children may find attractive. For example, smokeless tobacco products that don't require spitting or that dissolve like mints have recently been introduced. Additionally, more white male high school students are using smokeless tobacco than ever before, and the use of more than one type of tobacco product is common among young people. Cigar smoking is now common among high school males and may be increasing among other groups.[1]

Each day, more than 1,200 people die due to smoking. For every smoker who dies, at least two new young people or young adults become regular smokers, and 90% of these replacement smokers smoke their first cigarette by age 18.[6] We can and must prevent these young individuals from initiating smoking, and from progressing from smoking occasionally to smoking every day.

Out of every three young smokers, only one will quit, and one of those remaining smokers will die from tobacco-related causes. Most young people never consider the long-term health consequences associated with tobacco use when they start smoking. Furthermore, nicotine, a highly addictive drug, causes many people to continue smoking well into adulthood, often with deadly consequences.

While the long-term health effects of tobacco use are well-known, initiating smoking early in life has substantial health risks that begin almost immediately. These risks include serious early cardiovascular damage and a slowing of lung growth and development. This lung damage is permanent, causes immediate shortness of breath, and increases the risk of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and other pulmonary diseases later in life.

Many initiatives have been launched to help counter the influences that encourage young people to begin tobacco use. The Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement in 1998 curtailed much of the advertising that was

particularly appealing to young people.[7] The passage of 2009 legislation giving the Food and Drug Administration the authority to regulate tobacco products and tobacco advertising is another important means of helping decrease the appeal of tobacco use to this population.[8] Coordinated, multicomponent interventions that include mass-media campaigns, community programs, comprehensive statewide tobacco-control programs, price increases, and school-based policies have also proven effective in preventing the onset of tobacco use among young people and young adults.[1]

We know what works to prevent tobacco use among young people. The science contained in this and other Surgeon General's reports provides us with the information we need to prevent the needless suffering of premature disease caused by tobacco use and save millions of lives. By strengthening and continuing to build upon effective policies and programs, we can help make our next generation tobacco free.

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