

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Introduction to Smoking

You already know that smoking is bad for your health. But do you really understand just how dangerous smoking really is? Tobacco contains nicotine, a highly addictive drug that makes it difficult for smokers to kick the habit. Tobacco products also contain many poisonous and harmful substances that cause disease and premature death. Did you know that out of a group of 1000 smokers age 30, a full quarter of them will die of smoking-related illnesses prior to completing middle age, an additional quarter will die prematurely from smoking-related illnesses shortly after retirement age, and another large group will develop debilitating chronic illnesses as a result of their smoking? For many people, truly understanding the very real dangers associated with smoking becomes the motivating factor that helps them to quit.

Although it can be a very difficult habit to break, smoking is ultimately a choice; it is your responsibility to choose whether or not you will continue to smoke. Once you have decided to quit, you will benefit from learning about and understanding the many facets of the smoking habit that can put you on the right track to successful smoking cessation.

Since smoking cessation (stopping smoking) can be an extremely difficult process, understanding exactly how smoking harms your body can help keep you motivated to kick the habit. Although you may not think about the risks every time you smoke, smoking is not only dangerous, it is positively life-threatening. If you continue to smoke or use smokeless tobacco products, you are likely shaving years off your lifespan and setting yourself up for serious health problems.

Cigarettes

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), smoking is currently responsible for approximately 3.5 million deaths worldwide each year. Smoking is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States, and it kills more than 400,000 U.S. citizens each year. The World Health Organization predicts that by 2020, the worldwide death toll from smoking will reach 10 million each year, causing nearly 18 percent of all deaths in the developed world.

To help you to understand the magnitude of smoking-related deaths, we can compare them with other sources of premature death. For example, the number of people who die from using tobacco is greater than the combined total number of people who die from murder, suicide, car accidents, fire, AIDS, and using alcohol, cocaine, and heroin. Tobacco use also accounts for one-third of all cancers. Smokers die from cancer at a rate that is twice as high as nonsmokers, and heavy smokers die at a rate that is four times higher than nonsmokers. Lung cancer is the number one cancer killer of both men and women, and smoking is associated with nearly 90 percent of lung cancer cases. In addition, smoking is a leading cause of cancers of the mouth, tongue, throat, larynx (voice box), esophagus, stomach, pancreas, cervix, kidney, ureter, and bladder.

Cancer is not the only disease caused by smoking. Smoking also causes chronic bronchitis and emphysema, and worsens asthma. Cigarette smoking substantially increases the risk of coronary heart disease, including stroke, heart attack, aneurysm and vascular disease. It also contributes to peptic ulcers, varicose veins, osteoporosis, periodontal disease, Alzheimer’s disease, atherosclerosis, high blood pressure, allergies, and impotence. The bottom line is that continuing to smoke puts you at risk of contracting a serious, life-threatening illness. If you contract any one of the diseases listed above, your quality of life will deteriorate and you will shorten your life span.

Secondhand Smoke

©
2026 LifeWorks (US) Ltd
2026 LifeWorks (US) Ltd
Smoking is dangerous for anyone who comes into contact with it, but it is especially dangerous for unborn babies and small children. Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of infant mortality, premature delivery, and babies with low birth weight. Tobacco smoke contains high levels of nicotine and carbon monoxide, which interfere with the oxygen supply to the fetus, and cause the developmental delays often seen in the fetuses and infants of mothers who smoke. Smoking around infants and children has also been linked to sudden death syndrome and to a rise in respiratory illnesses, including an increased risk of developing asthma and an increase in the symptoms of asthma in children who already have the disease.

Cigarettes are the most commonly used and probably the most dangerous tobacco product on the market. However, smoking cigars and pipes and using smokeless tobacco products (chewing tobacco and snuff) are also risky. The following section outlines the risks associated with each type of tobacco use.

Cigars

Cigars differ from cigarettes in that cigarettes are made from tobacco wrapped in paper, while cigars are rolls of tobacco wrapped in tobacco leaves or another product that contains tobacco. Because of the way cigars are made, the smoke from a cigar tends to taste different, and is often more irritating. Regardless of whether or not a cigar smoker inhales, he or she is still at greater risk for serious health problems than a nonsmoker. Some cigars, particularly large cigars, have as much nicotine as several cigarettes combined, and this nicotine is absorbed as rapidly through cigar smoke as it is through cigarette smoke. Because cigars are wrapped in materials that contain tobacco, the nicotine in cigars can be absorbed through the mucus membranes of the mouth even if a smoker does not inhale. Cigar smokers are also at increased risk for numerous health problems:

- Cigar smoking increases the risk of death from lung, oral cavity, esophagus and larynx cancer.
- Cigar smokers are 4 to 10 times more likely to die from laryngeal, oral or esophageal cancers as nonsmokers.
- Cigar smokers who inhale are at increased risk for pancreas and bladder cancer, as well as for heart disease and lung diseases such as emphysema and chronic bronchitis.
- Cigar smoking has been linked to erectile dysfunction in men.

Pipes

Recent research by the American Cancer Society has found that pipe smokers face similar risks for cancer and other diseases as cigar smokers do. Pipe smokers were found to have an increased risk for lung, throat, esophageal, colon, and larynx cancers, as well as heart disease, stroke, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (emphysema and chronic bronchitis). Risks were generally less than those due to cigarette smoking but equal to or larger than the risks of smoking cigars.

Smokeless Tobacco

Although this article concentrates on the dangers of addiction to smoking, the use of smokeless tobacco can be just as dangerous. Smokeless tobacco is a category that includes chewing tobacco (“chew”) and snuff (“dip” or “rub”), that users either chew or place between their cheeks and gums. Many people are under the impression that smokeless tobacco products are safer than smoking; however smokeless tobacco products can be just as addictive and are similarly associated with many dangerous health effects.

Smokeless tobacco delivers a higher dose of nicotine than cigarettes, so that a person who uses smokeless tobacco 8–10 times per day might have the same amount of nicotine in their body as a person who smokes 30–40 cigarettes each day. Smokeless tobacco can have the following health consequences:

- After using smokeless tobacco for 3 to 5 years, white, leathery patches or lesions (called leukoplakia) often form on the cheeks or gums of users. These lesions sometimes develop into cancers of the lip, tongue, and cheek.
- Smokeless tobacco may play a role in causing high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.
- Individuals who use chewing tobacco and snuff are 2 to 3 times more likely than non-smokers to develop severe dental problems, including tooth loss, abrasion of the teeth, and bone loss around the teeth. Gum disease may not only result in tooth loss but is also thought to increase the risk for diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

It's not news to anyone that smoking is a health hazard, but many people choose to ignore the danger and continue smoking. Although some smokers are in denial about the risks associated with smoking, the majority of smokers continue because it is difficult to stop. Many smokers are literally addicted to nicotine and find it easier to continue the habit than to try to quit. It is the addictive quality of nicotine that makes stopping smoking so difficult.