

How Smoking Affects Your Health (for ages 12 and up)

There are no physical reasons to start smoking. The body doesn't need tobacco the way it needs food, water, sleep, and exercise. In fact, many of the chemicals in cigarettes, like nicotine and cyanide, are actually poisons that can kill in high enough doses.

The body is smart. It goes on the defense when it's being poisoned. For this reason, many people find it takes several tries to get started smoking: First-time smokers often feel pain or burning in the throat and lungs, and some people feel sick or even throw up the first few times they try tobacco.



The consequences of this poisoning happen gradually. Over the long term, smoking leads people to develop health problems like cancer, emphysema (breakdown of lung tissue), organ damage, and heart disease. These diseases limit a person's ability to be normally active — and can be fatal. Each time a smoker lights up, that single cigarette takes about 5 to 20 minutes off the person's life.

Smokers not only develop wrinkles and yellow teeth, they also lose bone density, which increases their risk of osteoporosis (pronounced: **ahs-tee-o-puh-row-sus**), a condition that causes older people to become bent over and their bones to break more easily. Smokers also tend to be less active than nonsmokers because smoking affects lung power.

Smoking can also cause fertility problems and can impact sexual health in both men and women. Girls who are on the pill or other hormone-based methods of birth control (like the patch or the ring) increase their risk of serious health problems, such as heart attacks, if they smoke.