



Teens and tobacco

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If you can make it into adulthood, the chance that you will start to smoke are miniscule. Making it through

the teen years without starting, however, is the challenge. A smoker is mostly created out of a young person; only rarely from an adult.

Our data comes from the 2007 edition of the Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey (CTUMS). The survey tells us that 19% of Canadians aged 15 years and older were current smokers, but that only 15% in the range of 15 to 19 years. Slightly more males are smoking, but the gap has narrowed from 6% in 2005 to only 2% in 2007. And youth who smoke daily consume an average of about 12 cigarettes a day. But why?

For decades, teens have known that smoking and tobacco are bad for you, yet they continue to take up smoking, albeit in reduced numbers from earlier generations. Why do they still take it up?

Young people today start smoking for mostly the same reasons as their parents did, and their parents' parents: to feel cool, rebellious, more grown-up and because of peer pressure. It can help them think they are become independent and taking control over their lives. Unfortunately, the opposite is true. Starting an addiction removes the independence of action, doesn't it?

The myths of smoking are still powerful. Hollywood continues to show smoking in good light. Anti-smoking campaigns do not necessarily send the messages we think they do.

As parents or interested adults, what can we do to help our teens to avoid the trap of starting to smoke? Or for that matter, using chewing tobacco or other

forms of tobacco? The first and best step is to engage them in the topic. Bring it up as soon as possible — it is never too early.

We should talk about the facts of smoking, of course, but also of the social and personal implications smoking entails. Some of the points to bring up include the fact that smoking is no longer socially acceptable or desirable. It is not a good tool for stress reduction and won't help make you more attractive. Smoking is certainly not important for a good social life. We can point out that fewer and fewer places even allow smoking.

The 'don't smoke' message can be difficult for some parents to deliver... if they are smokers themselves. However, since their kids are even more likely to start the habit, it becomes even more important that they do. The message need not be hypocritical. Instead, talk about why you started smoking and what it's meant in your life including the challenges and pains of trying to quit the addiction, the social implications and the money you spend every month on tobacco. "What could we buy if only we did not smoke," is an interesting approach.

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For teens that think smoking demonstrates their independence, remind

them that an addiction is in fact the polar opposite of independence. Addiction guarantees dependence, though to a new master.

There is good news, of course. Since 1999 we see that fewer and fewer young people are choosing to take up the addiction of tobacco. CTUMS in 1999 told us that 28% of teens 15 to 19 smoked daily. Today that number is at 15% and the downward trend seems ongoing.