

Living Longer Growing Stronger

from the Alaska Commission on Aging

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The mission of the Alaska Commission on Aging is to ensure dignity and independence for Alaska's seniors and to assist them, through programs and services funded by the Commission, to lead useful and meaningful lives.



**Alaskan Seniors:
Living Longer,
Growing Stronger**
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Is Your Future Going Up in Smoke?

Smoking is the number one preventable cause of death in Alaska. Most tobacco prevention efforts focus on discouraging people to start smoking. Because virtually no one starts smoking after age 20, antismoking campaigns focus almost exclusively on young people. However, a significant portion of America's smokers are seniors, who started in the 1930s to 1970s. This age group had the highest smoking rate of any U.S. generation. In the mid-1960s, 54% of adult American men smoked. Another 21% were former smokers. Over 34% of adult American women smoked, and another 8% were former smokers. These high smoking rates are causing today's high number of smoking-related deaths.

All the major causes of death associated with aging are linked to smoking or environmental tobacco smoke (ETS)—cancer, heart disease, and stroke. Each of these diseases generally results in months and years of disabling pain and suffering. Recent research indicates that smoking use is related to a number of other health problems and diseases that are common to aging, including hearing loss, dementia and Alzheimer's Disease (see related article on page 3 of this issue for details).

Dr. David M. Burns of the School of Medicine at the University of California, San Diego says smoking takes a higher toll on the elderly, causing cumulative damage that increases the risk of death and of smoking-related disease. Dr. Burns calls smoking a disease contracted in adolescence that causes death and disability predominantly at older ages. His research suggests that the health of elderly smokers who quit will bounce back, but not as well or as quickly as younger smokers who quit. The risk of lung cancer or heart disease declines in those who quit smoking after age 60, but that risk declines at a slower rate than for younger smokers.

In this issue of *Alaskan Seniors: Living Longer, Growing Stronger*, we'll outline health risks associated with smoking, and offer information on how Alaskans who do smoke can quit.

SMOKE STATS

According to the Alaska Tobacco Control Alliance, about 500 Alaskans die every year from smoking-related illnesses. The following information, some of which was prepared by The Center for Social Gerontology in Ann Arbor, Michigan, outlines the serious threat smoking poses to our health as we age:

- Of over 416,000 smoking-related deaths annually in the U.S., over 94% are persons aged 50 and over. Over 70% are persons aged 65 and over.
- One in three smokers die prematurely in the U.S., shortening their average life expectancy by 12 to 15 years. In Alaska, smokers lose an estimated 17.2 from normal life expectancy. Even at the most conservative estimate, this means that *one in three smokers eliminate their retirement years*.
- About 13% of Americans aged 65 and over are smokers. 15.7% of Alaskans aged 65 and over smoke.
- Among racial and ethnic groups, smoking is highest among American Indians and Alaskan Natives (34.1 percent). Smoking rates among American Indians and Alaska Natives are highest in Alaska (45.1 percent).
- Alaska's lung cancer death rate is 36.9%. The overall United States rate is 37%.
- Of cases of oral and throat cancer in the U.S., 95% occur in persons aged 40 and over; the average age at diagnosis is 60 years. Smoking, particularly when combined with heavy alcohol consumption, is the primary risk factor for approximately 75% of oral cancers in the U.S.
- Smoking is the number one cause of fires that kill seniors.

Smoking Cessation Resources in Alaska

In a recent survey, more than 80% of Alaskans who smoke said they want to quit. Research has shown that stopping smoking results in improved health at any age, including 65 and over. Some health benefits are almost immediate, and the longer people refrain from smoking, the more their health improves.

So how does one quit smoking? Those who choose to do so are faced with a dizzying array of methods, from common sense to comical. As with most health issues, the first, best step is to talk to your doctor.

The member agencies of the Alaska Tobacco Control Alliance distribute a free smoking cessation kit: *It All Starts With You: A Trailguide to Being Smokefree*. This kit, funded by State of Alaska tobacco settlement dollars, includes a list of agencies and organizations offering smoking cessation programs throughout Alaska, from churches and other community service organizations to professional therapists. The free kit can be ordered on the American Lung Association of Alaska Web site (www.aklung.org). The site also provides updates to the provider list. You may call for a free packet at 1-800-LUNGUSA, or 276-LUNG in Anchorage.

Other useful sites:

Alaska Tobacco Control Alliance (ATCA): www.chems.alaska.gov/tpc_atca.htm

The American Lung Association: www.lungusa.org

National Center for Tobacco-Free Older Persons: www.tcsg.org/tobacco.htm

Studies Link Smoking to More Health Problems

Doctors have known for a long time that smoking leads to America's most common killers: cancer, heart disease, and stroke. They also warn us that it causes a variety of other illnesses, and complicates others, like diabetes. New studies indicate unexpected links between smoking and other health problems many of us experience as we age, including hearing loss, mental decline, rheumatoid arthritis, and even Alzheimer's Disease.

Hearing Loss Linked to Smoking

A study published in the June 3, 1998 *Journal of the American Medical Association* indicates that cigarette smokers are almost twice as likely to have hearing loss as nonsmokers. Specifically, smoking appears to affect one's ability to detect high-frequency sound. Researchers aren't sure just how smoking affects hearing. Some think it may have a direct toxic effect, or it may cause damage by reducing blood flow to the body's hearing mechanism. Hearing loss has also been noticed among those who live with a smoker, including young children.

Smoking and Alzheimer's Linked

Another study from 1998 claims smokers are more than twice as likely as non-smokers to develop Alzheimer's disease and related disorders. Researchers tend to believe that genetic predisposition is the key to the onset of Alzheimer's, but new research finds that smoking is also a risk factor.

The study, conducted by a number of universities in Holland, tested nearly 7,000 people aged 55 and over. Results showed smoking was a strong risk factor for both men and women. One doctor warned that smokers are risking the very thing that makes them human: the ability to think.

The study linking Smoking and Alzheimer's was published in the international medical journal, *The Lancet*.

Heavy Smoking Tied to Rheumatoid Arthritis

The Annals of Rheumatic Disease recently published a study that indicates heavy smoking is strongly associated with the development of rheumatoid arthritis, even among smokers who do not have a family history of the disease. The study indicated that most rheumatoid arthritis sufferers who did not have a family history of the condition were heavy smokers.

Smoking May Hasten Mental Decline

Smoking after age 65 may hasten mental decline, according to a study of over 9,200 subjects.

The study linked the mental decline of older smokers with "silent strokes," very small strokes that go unnoticed by their victims. Smoking is already a known risk factor for stroke, which is a loss of blood flow that damages the brain.

The research found that older smokers had a significantly greater decline in short-term memory, time and place orientation, attention and calculation than older non-smokers.

The research was conducted at Erasmus University Medical School in Rotterdam, Netherlands and presented in 1998 at the American Academy of Neurology annual meeting.

These recent studies indicate that the full impact of smoking on our health and the health of those around us is not yet fully known. Quitting smoking is no guarantee of avoiding any of these health problems, of course, but quitting may improve your chances of not developing these problems as you age.

