

Talking to Your Child About Using Tobacco

If you think your child is too young to try tobacco, think again. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that each day more than 3,000 kids become regular smokers and that about one third of these children will eventually die from cancer, heart disease, or lung disease. More than 20 percent of high school students report that they smoked a cigarette before age 13. About 16% of U.S. high school boys in grades 9-12 use smokeless tobacco (chewing or spit tobacco), with rates rising as high as 35% in some western states.

Why should you have a conversation about not using tobacco with your child?
Here are some important points:

Addiction

- The younger people are when they start smoking, the more likely they are to become strongly addicted to nicotine.
- Symptoms of addiction (having strong urges to smoke) can appear in teens and preteens within weeks or only days after they become occasional smokers.
- Numerous studies indicate that young smokers are more likely to experiment with marijuana, cocaine, heroin, or other illicit drugs.

Short-term effects include

- Coughing and throat irritation
- More susceptible to colds
- Experience shortness of breath more often

Long-term effects include

- Increase risk of heart attacks, oral cancer, bronchitis, emphysema
- Secondhand smoke contains 43 chemicals that are known to cause cancer
- Smoking is the most preventable cause of premature death in this country.

Talk to Your Child

Introduce the subject of smoking and smokeless tobacco when your child is still young, in simple language and with clear rules. As your child grows, repeat the message in terms he can relate. Here are other helpful advices:

- Resist lecturing or turning your advice into a sermon. Nothing turns off teens and preteens more than a lecture.
- Don't do all the talking. Ask questions and truly listen to your child's answers, without judging.
- Tell your child the consequences for smoking in your family, and make sure you follow through on them
- If you smoke, quit. Children imitate their behavior after their parents.

Adapted from Center for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, American Cancer Society, and American Lung Association