

**Splurge** - Volume 3 Issue 3 (March 2008)

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## **A PERSONAL LETTER TO A SMOKER**

Approximately one third of adult Americans currently smoke one or more packages of cigarettes per day. This represents a huge core of our population who are at risk for having heart disease, strokes, emphysema, kidney damage and a myriad of other health problems. Most of these people have tried several times in their lifetime to stop this habit but are "hooked". Cigarette smoking takes a huge toll on the health of the American people costing us billions of dollars a year in added health care expense and billions of dollars a year to purchase the product itself. The risk of cigarette smoking is passed on to those around us in the form of second hand smoke, compounding this problem even further.

Many studies have been done to understand why individuals start smoking in the first place. It is looked upon as an exploration of the world around us by younger people and something "I might as well try". They feel energized and experience a better sense of concentration and reaction time briefly when they start smoking. There are no good studies to look at how long it takes for a person to become addicted. However, it does seem that after six weeks a great number of people are already addicted to smoking and for the rest of their lives, they will fight this addiction. The cost of cigarette smoking continues to rise. A one pack per day habit currently costs approximately \$32 per week and about \$128 per month. Doing the math, at the end of the year, most smokers will have spent around \$2,000 on cigarettes alone.

In the beginning, the major cost of this habit is the cigarettes themselves, but as time goes on, the incidence of developing multiple diseases increases in people who smoke. Many studies have shown that individuals who smoke more than half a pack per day often appear older than their true age with more wrinkles and rapid aging of their face. Smoking also seems to present huskiness in a person's voice. This is particularly true in female smokers. As I discuss this matter with many of my female patients, I ask them if they are willing to subject themselves to the early onset of all the diseases related to this addiction, not to mention looking and sounding older. Interestingly, the biggest concern they share is, "I look older than I should."

Recently there has been a rise in teenage smoking, particularly in teen females. It is very difficult to impress upon young people that someday they will regret smoking and that it will impact their health and appearance greatly if they continue. Today it appears that about twenty eight percent of high school students are smokers and of this group, fifty percent admit starting to smoke in middle school. Teen smokers find it very difficult to stop smoking due to social and peer pressure. Advertising by the cigarette industry currently tends to focus on young vigorous appearing individuals making this habit seem even sexier.

As a cardiologist, I encounter a myriad of patients daily that have had the early onset of vascular disease in large part related to smoking. Furthermore, if someone has diabetes, a high lipid level or any other

underlying problem, smoking tends to magnify this health risk several time over. Certainly smoking in teenage diabetics can be a disaster in terms of heart disease, renal disease and vascular damage of all sorts.

Despite our knowledge of the increased risk of heart attack, strokes, kidney damage and also blockages in leg arteries and limb loss, it is often had for smokers to focus on these risks. The general mentality is that "It won't happen to me" or "I'll be able to stop when I want to". Many people feel that smoking helps in coping with the stress in their lives and goodness knows there is enough stress going on in peoples lives making that rationalization a comfortable one for many people.

Often I have shown patients what happens to their lungs over a period of time and these changes are astounding. The autopsy of a patient with smoking induced lung disease reveals astonishingly tarry looking black lungs making it hard to understand how the lungs could possibly provide good levels of oxygen to the brain and the rest of the body.

There is recent data showing that heavy smoking may also be related to Alzheimer's disease and may cause vision changes such as early macular degeneration and may also decrease libido in both men and women.

As the cigar smoking trend continues, many people think that a cigar now and then cannot be dangerous to their health. However, a cigar has about eight times the amount of nicotine that a regular cigarette has making cigar smoking a very dangerous habit.

From any point of view, there is no good reason to start smoking. The risk of second hand smoke to an individuals loved ones makes this even riskier business. Now more that ever, a smoker has many helpful options to assist in quitting this life threatening habit. From smoking cessation programs, to other helpful aids such as nicorette gum, nicotine patches and oral tranquilizer type drugs and more recently a drug called Chantix. Chantix is somewhat of a breakthrough with a high level of success, ie; in the range of fifty to sixty percent in people who take Chantix. There recently have been articles pointing out that Chantix may put one at risk for suicide and certainly this is being researched further.

At the end of the day, the burden to quit smoking lies with the individual smoker. I encourage all of my patients to do the best they can to find a way to stop smoking. Amazingly enough, with all the aids available, many of my patients share with me that once they made to decision to quit, they told themselves "That was my last cigarette" and they were able to quit. If you or a loved one currently smoke and are serious about quitting, I encourage you to talk to your doctor about a smoking cessation plan. You'll be glad you did and the success you experience being able to overcome the nicotine addiction will be liberating. I encourage you to talk to your doctor about a smoking cessation plan. You'll be glad you did and the success you experience being able to overcome the nicotine addiction will be liberating.

Sincerely,

  
Jody Galichia

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