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Although teen smoking has declined in recent years, 23% of high school students are smokers. Over 6.4 million youth under 18 today will eventually die from smoking-related disease unless we do something to change this trend. Parents can greatly influence teens' decision about whether or not to smoke, even when parents smoke. It may not seem like teens are listening but parents' voices are with them, even when parents are not.

Parents make a difference!

If parents do not talk with their teen and convey the clear message that they disapprove, tobacco use by teens is greater. When parents engage their teens in discussions about the problems of tobacco use, teens are less likely to use tobacco.

The most effective conversations between parents and teens focus on issues that are important and relevant to the teen. The following are some suggestions to help guide your conversations.

Because youth often think tobacco use will not affect them until they are older, when talking with your teen about tobacco, emphasize the immediate consequences.

- **Physical consequences.** Using tobacco causes bad breath, yellow teeth, smelly clothes and hair, stained fingers, phlegm, and a gross sounding cough.
- **Tobacco's impact on performance.** Even among competitively trained young people, both performance and endurance are hindered by smoking. Young smokers have resting heart rates that are two to three beats per minute faster than nonsmokers.
- **Chemicals in cigarettes.** Cigarette smoke contains ammonia (used to clean toilets), cyanide (used to kill rats), and formaldehyde (used to preserve dead bodies).



- **Addiction caused by nicotine.** Explain that teens get addicted to nicotine just like adults and when trying to quit will go through withdrawal symptoms. Most people could avoid becoming addicted to tobacco by staying free of tobacco use during adolescence.
- **Most teens don't smoke.** Smoking is about the least popular thing to do if you want to hang out with other teenagers. Most consider smoking or chewing tobacco a foul, unattractive habit.
- **Dispel the myths.** Teens may think that smoking is viewed as sexy, and might even help them lose weight. These are myths. Make sure your teen has the facts about tobacco use.

It doesn't happen to everyone, so why me?

The long-term health risks of tobacco use.

Most teens have heard about tobacco's health risks, but are usually unconcerned because the consequences seem so far into the future. Younger

teens especially may be unable to understand or evaluate the long-term hazards such as lung cancer; they often feel that is something only older people should be worried about.

Smoking is an adult decision.

Teens are looking for ways to appear more adult and sophisticated and if using tobacco fits this image, teens may be more likely to smoke or chew tobacco. Teenagers who are rebellious often believe they should be able to do whatever adults do. The “adult decision” argument is one the tobacco industry uses to its benefit. Remember, the majority of adult smokers become addicted to tobacco as teenagers, so very few adults actually make the decision to start smoking.

In America, cigarette smoking is the cause of about one death in every five each year. Since teenagers become addicted to nicotine quickly, they are often targeted by advertisements with false images that smoking is attractive.

Facts to consider:

- Nicotine addiction from any type of tobacco is the most common form of drug addiction and one of the most difficult to overcome.
- Nicotine use can become a “gateway” to drugs such as marijuana.
- A person who has not started smoking as a teenager is unlikely to ever smoke.
- Tobacco use is the single most preventable cause of death in America, resulting in more casualties than AIDS, alcohol, car accidents, murders, suicides, and illegal drugs combined.
- Young people’s addiction to nicotine is not limited to smoking. Many youth also use smokeless tobaccos such as snuff and chewing tobacco. Smokeless tobacco can cause oral cancer and gum disease.
- Tobacco companies distribute free merchandise like baseball caps and sunglasses that appeal to young people.
- The best way to prevent tobacco use is when teens spend time with friends who are against it. Peer pressure to avoid tobacco use can be more powerful than any other form of prevention.

Setting family rules

If you don’t want your teen to use tobacco, don’t make it a choice. Teens are not allowed to decide if they want to attend school or if they want to drive a vehicle without a license. When tobacco use is presented as something youth can and should decide for themselves, it implies the decision is not important to parents. Establish a clear and firm no-tobacco-use policy for your teen, and consequences if the rules are broken. Parents who tolerate, look the other way, or approve of underage tobacco use are more likely to have children who use tobacco. When parents model the behaviors they hope their teen will adopt and share their attitudes and opinions about their teen using tobacco, they can reduce the chances their teen will smoke.

Where you can go for more information:

Families with Teens – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids
www.tobaccofreekids.org/

National Institute on Drug Abuse
www.drugabuse.gov/DrugPages/Nicotine.html

Parents. The Anti-Drug
www.theantidrug.com/

Tobacco Prevention and Control – Minnesota Department of Health
www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpcd/tpc

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