

# How to Help Adolescent Light Smokers Quit

## :: MOST ADOLESCENTS ARE LIGHT SMOKERS

Light smoking, generally defined as smokers who consume fewer than 10 cigarettes per day,<sup>1</sup> is common among adolescents. Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) indicate that 92.2% of all adolescent smokers in grades 9-12 smoke  $\leq$  10 cigarettes per day.<sup>2</sup> Girls are more likely than boys to consume  $\leq$  10 cigarettes per day regardless of racial/ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> However, 50% of current adolescent smokers have tried to quit with no success.<sup>2</sup>

## :: LIGHT SMOKING IS HARMFUL

Adolescents may perceive that smoking a few cigarettes per day is okay, but no level of cigarette smoking is safe.<sup>3</sup> Like any other smoker, light smokers are still exposed to nicotine, the addictive component in tobacco. Light smoking places many adolescents at risk for heavier smoking.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, smokers have an increased risk of cancer compared to non-smokers.<sup>5</sup> A longitudinal study found that death risk of ischemic heart disease increased among men and women who smoked one to four cigarettes per day.<sup>6</sup>

## :: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVIDERS

Light smokers who want to quit experience difficulty doing so,<sup>7</sup> and are less likely to receive treatment.<sup>8</sup> Youth are a particularly important target for smoking cessation interventions, since quitting smoking before age 30 produces the greatest impact on tobacco-related morbidity and mortality.<sup>9</sup> The 2008 Public Health Service Clinical Practice Guideline, *Treating Tobacco Use and Dependence*,<sup>10</sup> for the first time recommends that light smokers should be:

- identified,
- strongly urged to quit, and
- provided with counseling cessation services.

## Specific Recommendations

- Health care providers should routinely assess adolescent tobacco use at every encounter.
- If the adolescent does not smoke, providers should reinforce abstinence from tobacco by clearly communicating the health benefits of staying tobacco-free.
- If the adolescent smokes, providers should advise them to quit smoking irrespective of the number of cigarettes consumed per day.
- All adolescent smokers should be offered counseling services even if they smoke a few cigarettes per day.
- For patients who are not ready to make a quit attempt, clinicians may adapt motivational interventions provided in the Guideline.
- It is important for providers to intervene with adolescents in a manner that respects confidentiality and privacy (e.g., interviewing adolescents without parental presence).
- Providers should talk to all smokers about the harms of secondhand smoke exposure.

## REFERENCES

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