

## Time to stop smoking

More than 30 years ago, the Surgeon General of the United States determined that smoking is harmful to health. Nevertheless, today tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States. Tobacco kills more than 400,000 Americans each year, which is more Americans than were killed in both world wars and more people than are killed in car accidents, homicides, suicides, and fire, or who die using alcohol or illegal drugs combined.

There are currently an estimated 4.5 million child and adolescent smokers in the US, and each day another 3000 children begin to use tobacco. According to the US Surgeon General, approximately 40% of children who use tobacco begin experimentation in elementary school. The start of daily smoking is highest among children 12 to 14 years of age and half of all smokers begin to smoke before age 18. Two-thirds of high school students have tried cigarettes, and 12% smoke on a regular basis.

Cigarette smoking by children and adolescents produces the same type of respiratory problems experienced by adults, including chronic airway irritation and lower respiratory tract infections. Pathologic changes in the lungs begin within the first few years of cigarette smoking. Approximately one out of three young people who begin to smoke will die prematurely. In its 1994 policy statement on a tobacco-free environment, the American Academy of Pediatrics concluded:

- Tobacco is a major health hazard to children and adolescents
- Maternal use of tobacco has significant adverse effects on pregnancy and fetal outcome
- Exposure to environmental tobacco smoke has major effects on the health and psychosocial well being of children
- Tobacco use by children is associated with chronic and recurrent medical problems as well as with increased risk for significant morbidity and mortality
- Nicotine is an addicting substance and may serve as a gateway drug for the subsequent use of illicit substances
- Tobacco advertising is appealing to young people and may have a powerful effect on influencing them to begin tobacco experimentation
- A tobacco-free environment is an imperative for the health of children and adolescents.

In the same policy statement, the Academy of Pediatrics recommends:

- Inquiry into tobacco use and smoke exposure should be a routine part of both the prenatal visit with parents and every appropriate pediatric health supervision visit.
- As important role models, physicians should not smoke or use tobacco products, especially in the presence of their patients. They should be firm advocates of nonuse by children and their parents. They should inform smoking parents of the dangers of environmental tobacco smoke and the implications and complications of exposing their children to tobacco smoke. Information about available smoking cessation assistance should be offered.
- Discussion and anticipatory guidance about smoking and tobacco use should begin well before the patient enters junior high school, with particular emphasis on the importance of resisting the influence of advertising and the peer group.
- Pediatricians should work to promote smoke-free environments in physician offices, hospitals, schools, and other public places. Pediatricians should reject advertising messages that undermine the health of children and should place reading materials that do not contain tobacco advertising in their waiting rooms.
- Pediatricians should support vigorous antismoking programs within schools and be available to provide advice and guidance in this area. Pediatricians should be active in community antismoking campaigns.

It is not easy to stop smoking. Millions of advertising dollars are spent each year to make smoking appear glamorous. The appeal for children and adolescents to be like adults is great and the temptation to experiment with cigarettes is often too difficult to avoid. Yet there is progress as public institutions, theaters, restaurants and airlines adopt a smoke free environment. For the health of children, pediatric dentists should join with their pediatrician colleagues to produce a tobacco-free generation. The time to stop smoking is now!

