

Smoking and the Female Work Force

An interview with
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Q: What makes smoking different for women than for men?

A: Not only do women suffer the same smoking-related health problems that men do, but smoking also represents an additional health threat to women from an increased risk of cervical cancer, reproductive and pregnancy complications, early menopause, and an increased risk of coronary heart disease if they smoke and use oral contraceptives. Some evidence also suggests that women may have a harder time quitting than men, and recent data indicate that the message to avoid smoking has been less successful in reaching young women than young men. These factors will make smoking a unique problem for women in the next several decades.

Q: Don't men smokers outnumber women smokers in the United States?

A: It is true that there is a larger percentage of male smokers (32 percent) than female (27 percent), but the gap in male-female smoking prevalence has narrowed dramatically over the past 25 years. While the percentage of male smokers has dropped by nearly 40 percent from its peak, the percentage of female smokers has dropped only 18 percent since its peak in 1966. And, in some age groups (late teens and early 20s), the percentage of female smokers exceeds that of male smokers. The Centers for Disease Control estimates (if current trends continue) that by the mid 1990s there will be more women than men who smoke, both proportionately and in actual numbers of smokers. This trend now appears to be mostly the result of greater smoking initiation rates among women rather than lower quitting rates as compared to men.

Q: What makes women take up smoking?

A: Many factors appear to influence why women start and stop smoking. Among teenagers, 75 percent of all first cigarettes are smoked with another teen, usually of the same sex. Girls report that peer pressure, aspirations to emulate the liberated and glamorous advertising images of female smokers, access to a perceived method of weight control, or the presence of a smoking parent or sibling all influence that initial cigarette.

Maintenance of the smoking habit is often blamed on advertising claims, hunger suppression, relief of depression, as a means to cope with stress, and for the simple pleasure of smoking.

Q: Doesn't smoking help women keep their weight down?

A: Although many women report that they believe smoking helps keep their weight down, there is no consistent medical evidence to substantiate the benefit of smoking as a weight control measure.

It is true that most people who quit smoking gain some weight because of changes in their metabolism and eating behaviors, but average weight gains are small. Too many quitters, especially women, panic when they begin to gain weight and don't give their bodies and eating habits time to adjust.

Many cessation programs specifically address weight control as part of the cessation process. This factor should be considered when selecting a workplace cessation program.

Q: What about the relief of stress?

A: It is also true that women more often than men cite smoking as a way to cope with stress, including stress that many working wives and mothers experience due to their multiple-role strains. However, methods of coping with stress other than cigarette smoking can be learned, such as exercise, and stress management is frequently incorporated into smoking cessation programs.



**Smoking
Policy:
Questions
and
Answers**

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