

Drug Facts: TOBACCO

Nicotine is one of the most heavily used addictive drugs in the United States. Cigarette smoking has been the most popular method of taking nicotine since the beginning of the 20th century. In 1998, 60 million Americans were current cigarette smokers (28 percent of all Americans aged 12 and older), and 4.1 million were between the ages of 12 and 17 (18 percent of youth in this age bracket). Once hooked, nicotine addiction is extremely difficult to overcome.

In 1989, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a report that concluded that cigarettes and other forms of tobacco, such as cigars, pipe tobacco, and chewing tobacco, are addictive and that nicotine is the drug in tobacco that causes addiction. In addition, the report determined that smoking was a major cause of stroke and the third leading cause of death in the United States.

HEALTH HAZARDS

Highly addictive. Nicotine is highly addictive and acts as both a stimulant and a sedative to the central nervous system. The ingestion of nicotine results in an almost immediate "kick" because causes a discharge of epinephrine from the adrenal cortex. This stimulates the central nervous system, and other endocrine glands, which causes a sudden release of glucose. Stimulation is then followed by depression and fatigue, leading the abuser to seek more nicotine.

Nicotine accumulation. Nicotine is absorbed readily from tobacco smoke in the lungs, regardless of whether the tobacco smoke is from cigarettes, cigars, or pipes. Nicotine is absorbed readily when tobacco is chewed. With regular use of tobacco, levels of nicotine accumulate in the body during the day and persist overnight thus exposing daily smokers to the effects of nicotine for 24 hours each day.

Long-term hazards. In addition to nicotine, cigarette smoke is primarily composed of a dozen gases (mainly carbon monoxide) and tar. The tar in a cigarette, which varies from about 15 mg for a regular cigarette to 7 mg in a low-tar cigarette, exposes the user to a high expectancy rate of lung cancer, emphysema, and bronchial disorders. The carbon monoxide in the smoke increases the chance of cardiovascular diseases.

Second-hand smoke. The Environmental Protection Agency has concluded that secondhand smoke causes lung cancer in adults and greatly increases the risk of respiratory illness in children and sudden infant death.