

Wednesday, March 25th is Kick Butts Day 2009. Kick Butts Day is sponsored by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids to celebrate the fight against tobacco use and raise awareness of the dangers. Activities related to this event are available online at kickbuttsday.org. In celebration of the event, here's some information on what you can do to help keep your kids smoke-free.

Although it appears the number of young smokers has dropped over the last decade, smoking is still a big threat to today's youth. Parents play a major role in whether teens choose to smoke. It's important to know the facts about teen smoking so you can talk to your kids about the dangers, as well as the choices they have.

The Teen Smoking Situation

It's easy to have misconceptions about how common teen smoking is. According to the American Lung Association (2008), one out of every five high school students smoke. Still, every day four thousand kids between 12 and 17 years of age smoke their first cigarette.

Do many teen smokers become long-term smokers? A lot of young people who start smoking think they can quit when they're adults, but that's not always the case. Of the four thousand who smoke their first cigarette each day, about one-third become regular smokers. Ninety percent of all adult smokers started smoking before age 21. Avoiding the dangers of lifelong smoking begins at this young age.

(Statistics obtained from the American Lung Association, 2008)

Why do teens start smoking?

While peer pressure is often a major influence on teen smoking, other factors may be overlooked. Some teens view smoking as a way to express the rebellion of their adolescence. It can be merely experimental. For some, smoking projects an image of "cool" that many teens aspire to. In the same way, they may also smoke to feel more mature or adult-like.

Cigarette ads can also have an influence on teen smoking. Many ads display the "cool" image that attracts teens who want that life. Smoking in movies or by celebrities can also influence young people to smoke. Many teens see and think about these things every day, and their ideas about the smoking lifestyle can be hard to change. Kids have to be taught about the risks in order to overcome the attraction of smoking.

Risks of Smoking Facing Teens

Many people are aware of the life-threatening dangers involved with smoking. Lung cancer, emphysema, and difficulty breathing are issues many of us hear about frequently. However, there are specific risks for people who begin smoking before age 18.

- More likely to become addicted. Younger smokers are more likely to develop a strong nicotine addiction than adults.³ Many adolescents try to quit but are unable to.
- More likely to use illegal drugs. Teens who smoke are eight times more likely to use marijuana and 22 times more likely to use cocaine than non-smoking teens.³
- Worse long-term health effects. Since many teen smokers continue smoking for their entire lives, their health risks are greater than the risks for those who start smoking as adults.

Because of these risks, smoking at a young age can be worse than might be expected. Be sure your children know about the dangers of smoking.

Keeping Your Kids Smoke-Free

Education is the first step in keeping your kids smoke-free. Teens are more likely to respond to the short-term effects of smoking than the long-term health risks. Try telling them that smoking can make their clothes smell, their breath stink, and their teeth yellow. It can also make sports and activities more difficult because of the effects on the lungs.²

Teens tend to pay close attention to money, so it's a good idea to stress how much their smoking habit could cost them. If they spend their money on cigarettes, they may not be able to afford enjoyable activities such as going to the movies or getting pizza with friends.

Parents play one of the most important roles in preventing youth smoking. Just sitting down and talking to your kids about smoking can impact the choices they make. Being open and honest, helping them to develop good self-esteem, and discussing ways to say no can make a big difference in keeping your kids away from tobacco.

References:

¹ American Lung Association (ALA). (2008). Smoking and Teens Fact Sheet. Retrieved February 13, 2009 from <http://www.lungusa.org/site/pp.asp?c=dvLUK9O0E&b=39871>.

² KidsHealth. (2005). Smoking Stinks! Retrieved January 29, 2007 from <http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/watch/house/smoking.html>.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1994). Preventing Tobacco Use Among Young People: A Report of the Surgeon General. Retrieved January 29, 2007 from http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/sgr/sgr_1994/index.htm.

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