



FACTSHEET: WHAT MAKES SMOKING SO DANGEROUS?

Mission: Get serious about quitting

Action: Understand the risks

Verdict: Mission very possible

What makes smoking so dangerous?

Lots of things. Tobacco smoke contains tar, carbon monoxide, nicotine and over 4,000 chemicals. When you breathe them in, these toxic substances enter the lungs and go straight into the bloodstream and body tissues.

Chemicals

The chemicals in tobacco smoke are known to damage the lining of the coronary arteries (the arteries that supply the heart muscle with oxygen-rich blood). This damage leads to atheroma – the build-up of fatty material within the arteries, which in turn causes coronary heart disease. Tobacco smoke also makes the small particles in the blood, called platelets, more sticky – which means that the blood is more likely to form clots.

Carbon monoxide

Carbon monoxide is a poisonous gas and is fatal in high concentrations. It binds onto the red blood cells, reducing their ability to carry oxygen around the body and depriving the heart and body tissues of vital oxygen. Having carbon monoxide in the blood greatly increases the risk of heart disease.

Tar

The tar in cigarette smoke can cause cancer (most commonly lung cancer), and other serious diseases related to the lungs and airways. When inhaling, about 70 per cent of the tar stays in the lungs. And so called 'low-tar' cigarettes are no safer. People who smoke 'light' or 'mild' brands are likely to inhale as much tar as smokers of regular brands. Misleading descriptions like these are banned on cigarette packaging across Europe. There is no such thing as a 'safe cigarette'.

Nicotine

Most people who smoke become dependent on the nicotine they get from tobacco. Nicotine can raise the heart rate and blood pressure and speed up the smoker's metabolism.

Smoking after work

Raising awareness of stopping smoking at work has positive knock-on effects outside work too. Second-hand smoking as well as smokeless tobacco and shisha (water pipe smoking) might be common after work.

Second-hand smoke

Second-hand smoking, also called 'passive smoking', is when someone inhales other people's smoke. Research shows that people who are exposed to second-hand smoke can experience headaches, dizziness and sickness, irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, and worsening of their asthma and allergies. Long-term exposure to second-hand smoke can also increase the risk of getting lung cancer, coronary heart disease, and problems with the lungs and airways.

Smokeless tobacco

Smokeless tobacco includes dry chewing tobacco, moist oral tobacco or tobacco paste, and nasal snuff. There are also smokeless cigarettes, known as electronic cigarettes.

Smokeless tobacco is not a healthier alternative to smoking. In fact, some research suggests that people who use smokeless tobacco have a higher risk of dying from cardiovascular diseases such as coronary heart disease or stroke.

Using smokeless tobacco increases the risk of mouth cancer, throat cancer and cancer of the oesophagus. It can also cause other mouth diseases and gum disease. Chewing any tobacco products can make your teeth more vulnerable to tooth decay and can cause tooth loss. Shisha smoking can cause gum disease. The nicotine in smokeless tobacco products is very addictive and contributes to adverse health effects. For example, it can raise the heart rate and blood pressure, which makes the heart work harder.

The bottom line is that it doesn't help to use smokeless tobacco as a way to stop smoking – it's no better.

Shisha

Shisha smoking, also known as water pipe smoking or hookah, involves smoking flavoured molasses through a bowl and hose from which the smoker inhales. Shisha pipes use tobacco sweetened with fruit, herbs or molasses sugar, which makes the smoke more aromatic than cigarette smoke.

Traditionally, shisha tobacco contains cigarette tobacco, so like cigarettes it contains nicotine, tar, carbon monoxide and heavy metals, such as arsenic and lead. As a result, shisha smokers are at risk of the same kinds of diseases as cigarette smokers.

It's difficult to say exactly how much smoke or toxic substances you're exposed to in a typical shisha session. But generally people smoke shisha for much longer periods of time than they smoke a cigarette, and in one puff of shisha you inhale the same amount as you'd get from a smoking a whole cigarette. The average shisha-smoking session lasts an hour and research has shown that in this time you can inhale the same amount of smoke as from more than 100 cigarettes.

Some people mistakenly think that shisha smoking is not addictive because the water used in the pipe can absorb nicotine. In reality, because only some of the nicotine is absorbed by the water, shisha smokers are still exposed to enough nicotine to cause an addiction. And even tobacco-free shisha contains carbon monoxide and any toxins in the coal or charcoal used to burn the shisha.

Whether it's cigarettes or shisha, smoking still remains the number one cause of preventable death in the UK.

For more information and tips on quitting smoking, order our booklet Stop smoking (G118/0512) at bhf.org.uk/publications.

**MISSION VERY
POSSIBLE!**

