

## **Smoking: Is it Really Worth the Risk? (For teens...and parents)**

*by Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D.*

Jason's mother sat him down at the dinner table one Saturday afternoon to a feast his eyes could not believe. In front of him were his three favorite desserts of all time. First was a death-by-chocolate sundae dripping with the most delicious smelling hot-fudge sauce his nose had ever met. Next was an equally delectable piece of coconut cream pie, an addiction for which he had acquired at his first taste, long ago. Finally, in the third spot, beckoning him with a richness he could die for, was the biggest piece of German chocolate cake he had ever seen. German chocolate cake was, in his opinion, what we had fought two world wars to win.

As Jason wondered what he had done to deserve such good fortune, his mother began to speak. "Son, what you see before you are your three favorite desserts in the world. Is that correct?" Jason nodded and drooled. His mother continued. "Now, I have some good news and some bad news for you, and then you get to make a decision." Jason's eyes shifted a tad nervously. Something was up. "The good news is that you get to choose one of these three desserts to eat." So, that was it. He only got to eat one of them. Oh, well, he could live with that, he thought. "The bad news is that I have put poison in one of the three desserts. The poison is so lethal that it will kill you in a matter of minutes. It will be excruciatingly painful, and there is no antidote. If you don't die, you'll know that you chose well, or at least luckily."

Jason's mouth dropped open. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, sir," His mother replied firmly. "I'm dead serious. As serious as a heart attack, lung disease, or cancer. Now, which dessert do you choose? You have ten seconds."

"This is crazy! I don't need ten seconds! Only an idiot would eat any of them now that you've messed them up."

"That's right," said his mother. "Only an idiot would take a one in three chance of ingesting something that would kill him, even if it tasted really great." Then she took a package of cigarettes out and put them on the table. "So, tell me then. Why would a teenager ever start smoking these awful things when the odds of dying from heart disease, lung disease, cancer or some other smoking-related illness is one in three?"

Jason swallowed hard and wondered, "*How did she find my cigarettes?*"

## **So, are 28% of teens idiots?**

The above story is fiction (and poisoning food is much too dangerous to use as a teaching example, so don't even think about trying it with your friends!).) The fact that one in the three smokers dies from a smoking related illness is, however, all too true. There was time not long ago when about half of all teenagers smoked. That percentage has been reduced to about 28% in recent years. Maybe the majority of today's teens is too smart to play Russian roulette with two bullets in a six-shooter. But what about the other 28%? I don't think they necessarily lack intelligence, but they do lack good judgement. Here's what I think is going on with today's teen smokers:

1. They see kids who they consider cool smoking and figure, "why not?" Or maybe they just want to feel grown-up or perhaps make a statement of rebellion against their parents.
2. Whatever their motive, they ignore the risks, figuring that those awful smoking-related illnesses won't happen to them. Or they consider that the effects of these illnesses are too far in the future to be real threat now.
3. About one in three of them is genetically programmed to become easily addicted to nicotine. These kids get a real buzz from tobacco the very first time they use, and then, over a three-year period, they get heavily hooked.
4. Later, when these kids (many of whom are now adults) try to quit, they discover the urge to smoke or chew is too great, and they can't do it. (The ones who are not genetically programmed to get hooked don't like it that much to begin with and find it easier to quit.)

## **Need a few more good reasons not to even try tobacco?**

Intelligent people do not blindly do what they are told. They need reasons, and then they make a decision based on that information. So, here are a few more reasons to consider before you decide to try tobacco, or to make the long hard effort to quit:

1. Not only can it kill you, but it will age your skin before your time. Skin turns yellowish and leathery, making a young person look middle-aged and a middle-aged person look old.
2. It makes your breath smell awful to anyone who doesn't smoke. Non-smokers just don't like kissing ashtrays.
3. Plus it makes your hair stink, your clothes stink, your car stink, and your house stink.
4. Smoking dulls your taste buds so that food eventually loses much of its taste.
5. More and more restaurants do not allow smoking, so you can't even enjoy a good meal (even while you can still taste it) without craving a cigarette.
6. Smoking lowers your lung capacity, which is why athletes usually don't smoke. It can also cause chronic coughing, increased phlegm, and wheezing. Attractive picture, huh?

7. It costs a fortune! With a pack of cigarettes costing upwards of \$5 in many states (even when you buy by the carton) a pack-a-day smoker will spend \$35 a week or \$1850 per year. Put this money in a mutual fund at just 8% interest a year and in seven years you will have saved \$16,504—enough for a car! In ten years, that amount jumps to \$26,793! What could you buy with that?

All in all, smoking or chewing tobacco is a risk just not worth taking. Unfortunately, 28% of teens are not very good at evaluating risks, and a third of them will die because of it. Maybe you can help prevent a friend from being one of them. ■

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### ***About Michael Popkin***

Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at [www.ActiveParenting.com](http://www.ActiveParenting.com).

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