What does it mean to know a cumulative risk? Adolescents' perceptions of short-term and long-term consequences of smoking

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Abstract

A particularly important aspect of risk is its cumulative nature, when exposure to a hazard occurs repeatedly over time. The degree to which people understand cumulative risk has important theoretical and social implications. The latter play a role in disputes about whether those who smoke cigarettes know the risks of that activity. Proponents of the view that cigarette smoking reflects rational choices made by people well informed about the risks assume that knowledge of smoking risks is adequately assessed in terms of perceptions of the long-term risks. However, there is reason to question this assumption. The risks of smoking cumulate, one cigarette at a time. The present study demonstrates that a high percentage of adolescent smokers see no health risk from smoking the next cigarette or even from smoking regularly for the ‘first few years’. This denial of ‘short-term’ risks, coupled with a tendency observed in other studies for young smokers to underestimate the addictive properties of tobacco, indicates that many young people do not really understand the risks from smoking cigarettes.