

## *learn about* **tobacco**



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psychoactive  
substances, tobacco  
can be harmful*

### **What is tobacco?**

Tobacco is a plant that contains nicotine, a psychoactive (mind altering) drug that speeds up activity in our central nervous system but has relaxing effects too.

Tobacco is available in many forms, including cigarettes, pipe tobacco, chewing tobacco, and snuff or snus (a powder that is sniffed or put between the lower lip or cheek and gums). Nicotine also is available in non-tobacco products, including gum, patches and other smoking cessation aids.

### **Why do we use tobacco?**

Humans have been using tobacco for many years for a variety of reasons. For some, tobacco has played an important role in ceremonies and served to mark special occasions such as the birth of a baby. For others, it has been used to increase alertness or to relax and connect with friends and acquaintances at social gatherings. But like other psychoactive substances, tobacco can be harmful.

Whereas someone may smoke a cigarette to relax after work, using tobacco as a tool to relieve stress may lead to reaching for a cigarette whenever they feel irritated or tense. And they may begin to associate smoking with those feelings. If we use tobacco to help us concentrate, in time it may get difficult for us to study and work without smoking. And when socializing, we may enjoy the stimulant effects and camaraderie, but smoking can also be unpleasant or unacceptable to others.

### **What happens when we use tobacco?**

When tobacco leaves are smoked, nicotine is absorbed through the lungs into the bloodstream. When tobacco is chewed or sniffed, nicotine is absorbed through membranes in the mouth and nose. It then travels through the body to the brain.

Nicotine triggers the release of dopamine, a chemical in the brain associated with pleasure. The effects

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A minority of BC residents smoke\*

**15.6%**  
currently smoke

**27%**  
used to smoke

**57.4%**  
have never smoked

can range from mild stimulation to relaxation. But tobacco (and other nicotine products) may affect different people in different ways, depending on how much is used and how often. Other factors include our

- past experiences with tobacco, and
- mental and physical health condition.

## **Health effects**

Cigarette smoke contains more than 4,000 chemicals, many of which are known to cause cancer. Those who smoke a little once in a while may enjoy the stimulant or relaxing effects of tobacco and may not notice changes in their health. But even light and occasional smoking increases our risk of experiencing tobacco-related illness.

Tobacco use also has the potential to negatively affect our social lives. For instance, a few cigarettes may help us relax in a social setting. But non-smoking policies have become the norm in public places and in many homes, potentially leading to fewer opportunities to socialize with friends who may not want to be around second-hand smoke.

The longer a person smokes or is around smoke, the greater their chances of developing a smoking-related illness such as heart attack, stroke, cancer of the lungs or mouth or throat, and respiratory diseases such as emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Smoking also puts us at risk of developing problems with our teeth and gums. If women smoke when pregnant, they are at increased risk of miscarriage and their babies may have a lower body weight.

## **When is using tobacco a problem?**

Using tobacco is a problem when it negatively affects our life or the lives of others. Our patterns of tobacco use—that is, how much and how often we use it—can influence the level of risk. If we use tobacco regularly, in addition to increasing our chance of chronic disease as noted above, we may also develop dependence. This means we need to use tobacco just to feel normal and function in daily life. People who smoke regularly and then try to stop can experience feelings of withdrawal: irritability, restlessness, disturbed sleep and difficulties concentrating.

Many people think tobacco-related problems only happen to people who smoke a lot everyday. Yet even occasional use of small amounts of

\* Source: Canadian Tobacco, Alcohol and Drug Survey (CTADS), 2017

tobacco increases our risk of health problems. And tobacco smoke can harm those who inhale it in the form of second-hand smoke. The smoke that fills the air around a smoker contains dangerous toxins.

### **Mixing tobacco with other substances**

Many people like to smoke cigarettes while drinking alcohol with friends. Some people only smoke when socializing over drinks, while others smoke more than normal at such times. Combining tobacco with other substances can increase the risk of harms. The possible consequences can vary by the type of drugs and amounts used. The following are some common combinations and possible results.

**Alcohol.** Combining alcohol with tobacco may increase the risk of experiencing some cancers more than either drug would alone.

**Medications.** Tobacco smoke interacts with some medications and there is the potential for side effects or for reduced medicinal benefits. Checking with your healthcare professional and reading medication labels can help reduce this risk.

**Cannabis.** Since cigarette smoke contains cancer-causing toxins, adding tobacco to a joint to make a supply last longer is riskier than smoking cannabis by itself.

### **How to make healthier choices about tobacco**

Most people know tobacco use isn't healthy. Still, many people find it difficult to cut down on the number of cigarettes they smoke, let alone give up smoking altogether. Whenever we choose to use tobacco, it is helpful to know what steps we can take to ensure that our use is the least harmful

possible. For example, chewing tobacco or vaporizing nicotine in an electronic cigarette is less harmful than smoking the substance. The following are some other useful guidelines to follow.

**Not too much.** Limiting how much we use in a given period helps us carefully monitor our use and may be a step towards quitting.

**Tip:** Buy one pack at a time and set a limit to how many cigarettes you'll smoke in one day or one week (avoid compensating by inhaling more deeply). Help yourself stick to your plan by banking the money you would have spent if you'd gone over your limit, or treat yourself to a healthy alternative.

**Not too often.** Reflecting on our smoking patterns helps us figure out which situations and feelings trigger our desire to smoke. Restricting the times that we allow ourselves to smoke can help us break our patterns.



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*Tip:* Avoid smoking everyday or every weekend. If necessary, plan fun or interesting things to do on the days and weekends you're not smoking so you don't spend your time thinking about smoking.

*Only in safe contexts.* Making informed decisions about where and with whom we can smoke helps to prevent harms to those around us and may help modify our smoking patterns.

*Tip:* Smoke outside your home and vehicle, especially if you have children or others in your care.

## Is tobacco legal?

In BC, the legal age for buying tobacco is 19. It is illegal to sell or give tobacco products to minors. Smoking is banned in public buildings and many other public spaces. It is also banned in vehicles carrying children under 16. Most workplaces have 'no smoking' policies. Electronic cigarettes became legal in Canada in May 2018. They are regulated through the Tobacco and Vaping Products Act.

## What to do if you or someone you know wants to explore change

For information on smoking cessation support services, call **QuitNow** at 1-877-455-2233 (toll-free, 24 hours a day) or visit [www.quitnow.ca](http://www.quitnow.ca).

To better understand how substances play a role in your life, visit the **You and Substance Use Workbook** on the **Here to Help** website: [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca). This website also features detailed information on substance use and mental health.

You can also find information about a wide variety of substance use issues on the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, website: [www.cisur.ca](http://www.cisur.ca).

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funding provided by



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