How Does Smoking Affect Your Heart?

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Smoking and Its Risks

Each year more than 230,000 people die from cardiovascular diseases related to cigarette smoking. Heart disease caused by cigarette smoking is the most preventable risk factor--more than obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure. Cigarette smoking is directly linked to the incidence of atherosclerosis, high blood pressure, stroke, angina and peripheral artery disease.

Chemicals in Cigarettes

There are thousands of harmful chemicals and carcinogens in cigarette smoke. The two most damaging chemicals are nicotine and carbon monoxide. Nicotine is responsible for constricting and narrowing the arteries, elevating the heart rate and increasing the resistance of blood flow. In short, cigarette smoking causes the heart to work harder.

How Smoking Affects Your Heart

Carbon monoxide adversely affects the heart by reducing the amount of oxygen the blood cells can carry to the heart and other tissues. It also damages the lining of the arteries, accelerating the buildup of plaque that leads to atherosclerosis. When the arteries that supply blood to the heart become clogged with plaque, the person experiences pain and pressure in his chest, left arm and jaw. These symptoms are called "angina." If the heart is deprived of enough blood, heart muscle will die, causing a "heart attack." Even if there are no noticeable symptoms, the build-up of plaque can cause the heart to work harder than normal. In an effort to overcome the resistance of plaque in the arteries, the heart tissue becomes thicker and less efficient, often leading to "congestive heart disease" or failure.

The Effects on Cholesterol

Smoking cigarettes impacts all types of cholesterol --both the good and the bad. The chemicals in cigarette smoke increase the total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol (often called "bad" cholesterol) and lower HDL, or the "good" cholesterol. It is also associated with higher levels of triglycerides.

Resources

- [American Heart Association](#)