Drugs a-to-z

Tobacco & Cigarettes: Factsheet

Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 7–8, Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Drugs (General), Tobacco

Tags: cigarettes, cigars, ciggy, chop-chop, smokes

Time Allocated: Partial lesson (under 45mins)

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

What are tobacco and cigarettes?

Cigarettes are made from the dried and cured leaves of the tobacco plant. Nicotine is the key addictive drug in tobacco. Like heroin and cocaine, nicotine changes the way the brain works and causes cravings for more nicotine.

Nicotine can be found in:

- Tailor-made manufactured cigarettes
- Roll-your-own cigarettes
- Cigars
- Pipe tobacco
- Water pipe tobacco (shisha, narghile), read more
- Chop-chop (illegal loose rolling tobacco)
- Herbal and spiced cigarettes
- E-cigarettes/vapes, read more
- Nicotine pouches and snus, read more

What else do cigarettes contain?

Research shows that cigarette smoke contains more than 7,000 chemicals, many of which are harmful toxins. These include:

- **Carbon monoxide** — this also comes out of car exhausts.
- **Lead, mercury, chromium and cadmium** — toxic metals.
- **Hydrogen cyanide** — used in larger doses in gas chambers.
- **Ammonia** — found in cleaning products and added to cigarettes to increase the nicotine hit.
- **Polonium 210** — a radioactive substance.

Some of the toxins in cigarette affect the mouth, throat and lungs, while others travel in the bloodstream throughout the body. The longer a person smokes, and the more often they smoke, the greater their risk of developing diseases such as lung cancer.

Sometimes people believe that a certain type of tobacco, such as roll-your-own cigarettes, is more natural and healthier than manufactured 'tailor-made' cigarettes. This is not true. Inhaling smoke is harmful no matter what type of tobacco is used.

How many young people have tried cigarettes?

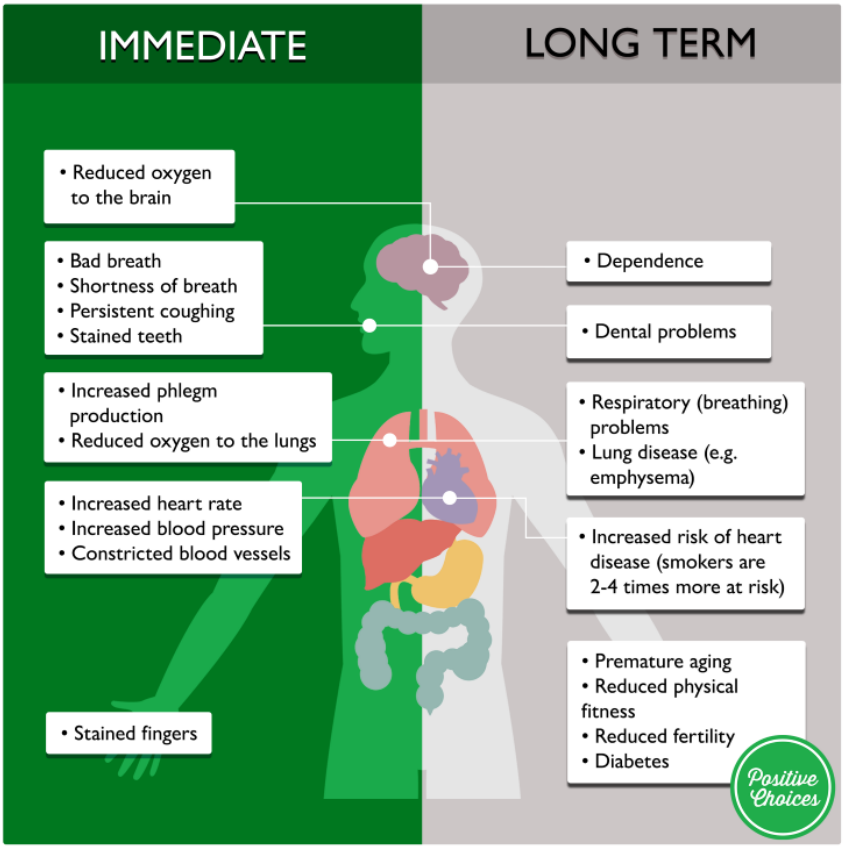
Smoking rates among school students have fallen greatly since the 1980s. According to the 2022-2023 Australian secondary schools' survey, 1 in 30 students (3%) aged 12–17 reported they had smoked in the past month.

What are the effects of cigarettes?

Even though smoking is legal, it doesn't mean that it's safe, or that it is less harmful than illegal drugs. In fact, smoking is responsible for more deaths than any other drug. Smoking is legal because it was already widely used and socially accepted before the health risks became understood.

The effects of tobacco smoking vary, but may include:

Immediate	**Long-term**
Increased heart rate	Dependence (see glossary)
Increased blood pressure	Dental problems
Reduced oxygen to the brain and lungs	Premature aging
Bad breath	Reduced physical fitness
Stained teeth and fingers	Reduced fertility
Shortness of breath	Respiratory (breathing) problems
Increased phlegm production	Increased risk of heart disease (smokers are 2-4 times more at risk)
Persistent coughing	Lung disease (e.g., emphysema)
Constricted blood vessels	Diabetes
	Cancer



What are the effects of second-hand smoke?

Second-hand (passive) smoking occurs when people near a smoker breathe in the smoke. This is not safe and can have serious health effects including lung cancer and heart disease.

Electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes)

Electronic cigarettes (also known as ‘e-cigarettes’ or vapes) are handheld electronic devices that mimic the effects of a tobacco cigarette but produce vapour instead of smoke when inhaled. The use of e-cigarettes is often referred to as ‘vaping’.

According to the 2022/23 Australian Secondary School Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey, 30% of young people aged 12-17 have used e-cigarettes. Around two thirds (69%) of these young people had never smoked a tobacco cigarette before trying an e-cigarette.

As e-cigarettes are a relatively recent phenomenon, there are no long-term studies that can establish their safety. Because of this, it is unclear whether vaping is any safer than smoking tobacco, and the long-term effects are currently unknown.

Read more about Electronic cigarettes in our factsheet HERE

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney, the National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, and the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University.

Sources

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