

Smoking is a major cause of heart disease and stroke. The fact is, every year more than 400,000 deaths in the United States are due to smoking. About 190,000 of these deaths are caused by heart and blood vessel diseases.

Smoking costs Americans an estimated \$130 billion annually in medical care. This includes the cost of smoking during pregnancy, lost workdays, lost output from early death and retirement and fires caused by smoking.

Smoking and heart attacks

Tobacco smoke, high blood pressure, high levels of cholesterol in the blood, obesity, diabetes and physical inactivity are the major risk factors for heart attack that can be changed. People who already have high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol or both and who smoke increase their risk of heart attack even more. The more a person smokes, the greater their risk of heart attack.

People who smoke a pack of cigarettes a day have more than twice the risk of heart attack than people who've never smoked. Smokers who have a heart attack have less chance of surviving than nonsmokers who have a heart attack. And people who keep smoking after a heart attack increase the chances that they'll have a second attack.

Smoking and stroke

Several large studies have linked cigarette smoking with different kinds of stroke. In the Framingham Heart Study, stroke incidence was 40 percent higher in male smokers and 60 percent higher in female smokers than in nonsmokers. Within two years of quitting smoking, stroke risk fell significantly. Within five years, stroke risk was the same as for nonsmokers.

Why you should stop smoking now

No matter how much or how long you've smoked, when you quit smoking, your risk of heart disease starts to drop. One year after quitting, your risk of death from heart attack is cut in half. It's important to stop smoking before the signs of heart disease appear. Once they show up, even if you quit smoking, it will take 15 years for your heart attack risk to get as low as someone who's never smoked.

If you need help quitting, talk to your healthcare provider. There are many programs available to help you.