



PREVENTABLE HEALTH RISKS AND DEATHS

BY LESLIE ZGANJAR

"I think it's a tragedy that we're still talking about this issue more than 50 years after the US Surgeon General's report on smoking showed proof positive that it [smoking] is the leading preventable cause of cancer and the leading preventable cause of heart disease," said Dr. Alan Blum, professor and Gerald Leon Wallace, MD, Endowed Chair of Family Medicine at the College of Community Health Sciences.

Approximately 480,000 smoking-related deaths occur each year in the US, and those who smoke often don't experience illness until 20 to 30 years after they first light up, Blum said.

According to the National Institutes of Health, cigarette smoking remains the most avoidable cause of death. Upward of 90% of lung cancers are due to cigarette smoking. Half of all heart disease-related deaths are attributed to smoking, as well as more than 80% of cases of emphysema.

Blum, who also directs The University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society, which he founded in 1998, believes the ongoing smoking pandemic is one of the worst health care failures of the 20th and 21st centuries. "Lung cancer is a man-made tragedy that we could and should have prevented."

A big part of the problem is that everyone thinks the war on smoking and tobacco has been won, he said. While smoking is banned in many places (the College and UA have been smoke-free campuses since 2015), and while the number of US individuals who smoke has declined from more than 55 million 50 years ago, there were still 34.4 million adults smoking cigarettes in 2017. More than 16 million Americans are living with smoking-related diseases, according to

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Dr. Alan Blum, professor and family medicine physician

the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

According to Blum, the best way to stop smoking is to go cold turkey and buddy up with a friend or relative who has stopped smoking or who is also trying to stop. Medications can help some people, but they can be expensive and often unnecessary, he said.

"Many people make stopping harder than it really is. A simple oral substitute such as mints, sugarless gum, unsweetened iced tea, a piece of fruit or kissing can make stopping [smoking] a pleasurable experience. Doing simple one-minute relaxation exercises in a quiet room or taking a quick walk around the block or around the house can help postpone each cigarette. So, too, can trying never to light up on awakening, with drinking a cup of coffee or while driving," Blum said.

Money saved by not buying cigarettes is huge, he said, adding that a pack-a-day habit amounts to \$2,000 annually. Blum also said that smoking a pack of cigarettes a day translates to more than 72,000 inhalations, over the course of a year, of carbon monoxide, ammonia and formaldehyde, as well as more than 40 known cancer-causing chemicals.

The good news is that it's never too late to stop smoking. Although risk of lung cancer may not decline for many years, there are both immediate and long-term benefits to the heart, lungs, eyes, teeth, gums and reproductive system when one kicks cigarettes, Blum said.