Is social smoking really all that bad for me? [1]

Alice,

I only smoke occasionally. I smoke when I go out to clubs, etc. (once or twice a week). I smoke about ten cigarettes each time. Is this likely to have an impact on my health?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It may not seem like a lot, but puffing while you party once or twice a week can indeed have negative effects on your health. And although you don't seem to be smoking every day, having ten or twenty cigarettes per week would actually land you in the range of being a "regular" smoker. Whether you call it social or regular smoking, there are definitely health risks, even if you only smoke when you go out. Here are some of the risks that studies have linked to casual smoking:

- **In one study, approximately half of young people who began smoking "casually" or "socially" were smoking every day within one year.** Smoking cigarettes only occasionally can lead to a daily smoking pattern and addiction to nicotine. The process of becoming addicted may vary greatly for different people, depending on their overall health, genetics, social circles and influences, and family history.

- **Drinking more alcohol may increase your desire to smoke.** One study found that people who drank four drinks were more likely to want to smoke than people who drank only two. If you find yourself wanting to smoke while you're drinking, you may want to consider if your alcohol consumption plays a role in how much you smoke.

- **People who smoke less than a pack a week seem to have just as much blood vessel damage as those who smoke a pack each day or more.** Smoking interferes with the lining of blood vessels and can cause atherosclerosis, a condition in which fat and cholesterol build up on the walls of arteries. Atherosclerosis interferes with healthy circulation and can lead to a heart attack.

- **Men who smoke between six and nine cigarettes each day and women who smoke between three and five double their risk of heart attack.** Even light, casual, occasional, or social smokers increase their risk of heart attack by smoking just a pack or two a week.

- **Women who smoke and take hormonal birth control are at a higher risk for serious health problems.** Even smoking a few cigarettes a week can increase the likelihood of heart disease, blood clots, stroke, liver cancer, and gallbladder disease.

- **Pregnant women who smoke as few as ten cigarettes or less a day run a higher risk of giving birth to unhealthy babies.**
Problems can include premature birth, low birth weight, higher chances of the baby having asthma, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

When it comes to smoking and certain health risks, it seems that even smokers who don't inhale or non-smokers who breathe in second-hand smoke place themselves at increased risk for negative health effects. It sounds like you may be concerned about the impact of smoking on your health. If so, consider asking yourself some of these questions: What concerns me about my smoking pattern? Have I noticed any health issues I think may be linked to smoking? Why do I smoke when I go out? How would it feel to give up smoking entirely?

New York City residents can call 311 and New York State residents can call 1-866-NY-QUITS [697-8487] for free access to smoking cessation support and resources. Elsewhere in the United States, take a look at the government site Healthfinder [2] to locate resources near you. Even if you don't feel you are addicted, you may find these resources useful in helping you decide what to do in regards to your tobacco use.

Unfortunately for those who enjoy smoking socially, research shows that there is no "safe" amount of cigarettes or other tobacco products. By thinking about your health concerns, your smoking pattern, and the risks associated with smoking you can make a decision about how you use (or don't use!) tobacco in the future. Best of luck,

Alice!

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