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. In fact, whether you identify as a daily smoker, a social smoker, or even a non-smoker, exposure to cigarette smoke is correlated with diseases such as cancer, stroke, and cardiovascular and respiratory illness. While you only smoke when you go out, 10 to 20 cigarettes averaged over a week can still increase your risk of developing smoking-related conditions in the future.

Parsing out the exact risk associated with cigarettes for social smokers isn’t easy, as many social smokers are smoking and consuming alcohol simultaneously, but the research indicates that no amount of smoking is “safe” for an individual. Regular smoking, even if it’s the equivalent of one cigarette per day, is an indicator of negative health outcomes, as evidence demonstrates that the duration of time over which a person smokes is more predictive of future issues than number of daily cigarettes. In fact, folks who smoke one to ten cigarettes a day are up to three times more prone to lung cancer than non-smokers and are more likely at risk for premature death. Not only is smoking risky business, but extended exposure to secondhand smoke is correlated with a number of diseases as well.

Along with increasing health risks, social smoking also has been shown to be difficult to quit, just as daily smokers struggle to kick the habit. Additionally, the fact that social smokers see their smoking as occasional and less of a health risk, they’re less likely to seek treatment and might continue smoking long-term due to the misconception.

Since you seem to be concerned about the impact of smoking on your health, it might be helpful to consider 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? By thinking about your health concerns, your smoking patterns, and the risks associated with smoking you can make a decision about how you use (or don't use!) tobacco moving forward. If you're interested in putting down the cigarettes and quitting altogether, you could try reaching out to a health care provider for information on how to stop or check out Smokefree.gov [2].

Best of luck,

Alice!

Category: Alcohol & Other Drugs [3]
Cigarettes, Chewing Tobacco, & Other Nicotine [4]

Related questions

Smoking for stress relief [5]
The birth control pill and smoking [6]
Marijuana: Certain methods of smoking healthier than others? [7]
Can electronic cigarettes help me quit smoking? [8]
Alcohol and cigarettes — quitting both at the same time? [9]

Resources

Tobacco Cessation (Morningside) [10]
Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (CUIMC) [12]

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[1] https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/social-smoking-really-all-bad-me-0