Dear Alice,

Hi! Your site is very helpful. I have a few friends who smoke. We are friends since the past four years; they started smoking about a year ago. They tell me to smoke, I don't do it, so they call me a jerk. I have never TOUCHED a cigarette in my life.

1. Should I smoke?
2. If I smoke one cigarette about once a week, will it harm me in any way?
3. Will it make me a chain smoker?
4. Which is the safest brand of cigarette, health wise?

Very Confused

Answer

Dear Very Confused,

Glad you've found the site helpful! Your concern is valid and what you’re experiencing is a pretty common dilemma. Ultimately, only you can make the decision as to whether or not to try smoking. That being said, even social smoking can have negative effects on health, including increased risk for lung and cardiovascular disease. Regardless of the brand, all cigarette usage carries risk. It can feel difficult to make your own decision while also dealing with peer pressure from your friends. So kudos to you for seeking out more information to help you make the best decision for you. Who knows, your friends might have also felt pressured to smoke and may benefit from hearing what you learn.

People start smoking for many different reasons. Some may do it because they think it looks cool. Others saw their family members or older friends smoking and may consider the habit a mark of maturity. It’s also possible that some people may associate smoking with relaxation or stress relief. Much like what you’ve described, it could be that some people started smoking because of peer pressure, to feel accepted, or seem agreeable.

As you ponder your decision to smoke or not, it's worth it to consider that many people don’t intend to smoke long-term. However, they may continue, not because they want to, but because
they're addicted and have trouble quitting. Cigarettes contain nicotine, a highly addictive, fast-acting substance (most people feel the stimulant effect within ten seconds of use). Smoking may make you feel calm and relaxed, stimulate your mood, make you feel more alert, and decrease your appetite. However, once the initial buzz wears off, you might feel tired and want that buzz to return (which may make you light up another cigarette). These factors could lead you to continue to smoke and make it increasingly difficult for you to stop.

It’s also worth noting that whether you smoke or are exposed to it secondhand, studies show that anyone exposed to cigarette smoke is at higher risk for negative health impacts. While there are a number of brands and varieties of cigarettes on the market, the bottom line is this: they all contain nicotine and other chemicals that can be addictive and increase health risks.

You mention receiving some negative reactions from your friends when you choose not to smoke. You can reiterate that you simply don’t want to — "No, thank you" is fine to say and it’s okay to leave it at that. You might try to offer some reasons for why you don’t smoke, whether they’re your actual reasons for not smoking or not. You could tell your friends that you’re training for a race and don’t want to feel short of breath, or that you don’t want to spend your extra income on cigarettes, or you can tell them you don’t want your parents to find out. As you navigate this situation, you might also benefit from taking time to reflect on your friendship with them — do you want to hang out with people who call you names and encourage you to engage in behaviors when you’ve already told them you weren’t interested? Do you want to maintain friendships with people who don’t support and respect your decisions? Though it’s not easy, reflecting on these questions may help you surround yourself with friends who support your decisions and encourage your well-being.

Good luck as you make your decision!

Alice!
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