Cigar Smoking and Cancer: Questions and Answers

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH CIGAR SMOKING?

Studies have shown that cancers are associated with cigar smoking. There may be a link between cigar smoking and cancer of the pancreas. Daily cigar smokers who inhale are at increased risk for heart and lung disease, including cancer. The more you smoke, the greater the risk of disease.

Overall cancer deaths among men who smoke cigars are 1/3 higher than among nonsmokers. Both cigar and cigarette smokers have similar levels of risk for oral, throat, larynx (*voicebox*) and esophageal cancers. Studies estimate that smoking one cigar is equal to smoking two and a half cigarettes.

A recent increase in cigar smoking, especially among women and teenagers, has come along with the idea that cigars are not as harmful to your health as cigarettes. People think this true because cigar smokers do not inhale. However, this perception is wrong.

Most of the same cancer-producing chemicals found in cigarettes (tars and nicotine) are found in cigars. Cigar smokers increase their chances of heart disease and stroke. Tobacco use, whether from cigarettes, cigars or smokeless tobacco, causes almost twice as many strokes, heart attacks, and other heart diseases as it does lung cancer. Cigars can cause stomach ulcers.

Studies show that all tobacco users are 5 to 10 times more likely to get cancer of the mouth or throat than nonsmokers. Cigar smokers have 4 to 10 times more risk than nonsmokers of dying from laryngeal, oral, or esophageal cancers. Because of the way cigars are puffed, more cancer causing substances (*carcinogens*) sit in the mouth, increasing the risk of oral cancer.

WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF INHALING ON DISEASE RISK?

Cigar smokers who have a history of cigarette smoking are more likely to inhale cigar smoke. Cigar smokers may have higher rates of lung cancer, heart disease, and chronic lung disease than nonsmokers, but not as high as cigarette smokers. These lower rates for cigar smokers may be related to reduced inhalation. However, cigar smokers still absorb nicotine, regardless of whether they inhale. Cigars are mildly alkaline, which means the nicotine is easily absorbed through the mouth and lips.

HOW ARE CIGARS AND CIGARETTES DIFFERENT?

Cigars and cigarettes differ in both size and type of tobacco used. It is not uncommon for some premium cigars to contain as much tobacco as an entire pack of cigarettes.

- Cigarettes are consistent in size, and contain less than 1 gram of tobacco each. Most cigarettes take less than 10 minutes to smoke.
- Cancer causing nitrosamines, toxins and tar are found at higher levels in cigar smoke than in cigarette smoke. Cigars can contain between 1 gram and 20 grams of tobacco. Large cigars may take between 1 and 2 hours to smoke.

HOW ARE THE HEALTH RISKS FROM CIGAR SMOKING DIFFERENT FROM SMOKING CIGARETTES?

- Health risks of both cigars and cigarettes may be linked to the extent of smoke exposure. Smoke from cigars and cigarettes contain many of the same toxic and cancer causing compounds. Health risks may be related to daily use and degree of inhalation.
- Most cigarette smokers smoke every day, and inhale. Many cigar smokers smoke only once in a while, and most do not inhale.
- All smokers directly expose the lips, mouth, tongue, throat, and larynx to smoke and its toxins. Even

holding an unlit cigar between the lips exposes these areas to toxins. When saliva containing smoke products is swallowed, the esophagus is exposed to toxins.

- Cancer of the larynx occurs at lower rates among cigar smokers who do not inhale than among cigarette smokers. Lung cancer risk among daily cigar smokers who do not inhale is double that of nonsmokers, but significantly less than the risk for cigarette smokers.

WHAT ARE THE HAZARDS FOR NONSMOKERS EXPOSED TO CIGAR SMOKE?

Environmental tobacco smoke, also called secondhand or passive smoke, is the smoke released from a lit cigar or cigarette, or exhaled by a smoker. Because cigars contain greater amounts of tobacco than cigarettes, they produce greater amounts of secondhand smoke.

Cigars go through a long aging process, which produces high levels of cancer causing toxins. These toxins are released when a cigar is smoked. Cigar wrappers have less holes than cigarette wrappers. The wrapper makes the burning of cigar tobacco less complete than that of cigarettes. However, there are more toxins in cigar smoke. One cigar produces more carbon monoxide than three cigarettes.

ARE CIGARS ADDICTIVE?

Nicotine is the chemical agent in tobacco that is capable of causing addiction or dependence. Cigars can contain up to 70 times more nicotine than cigarettes.

When cigar smokers inhale, nicotine is absorbed rapidly into the bloodstream. The nicotine is absorbed mainly through the lining of the mouth, rather than through the lung. Nicotine absorbed through the lining of the mouth is capable of creating a powerful addiction. Both inhaled and non-inhaled nicotine may be addictive.

Addiction studies of cigarettes and spit tobacco show that addiction to nicotine occurs mainly during the teen years, when young people begin using tobacco products. Studies also find that cigar smokers are over twice as likely to start smoking cigarettes for the first time than people who never smoked.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF QUITTING?

There are many health benefits to quitting cigar smoking.

- Chances of developing cancer and heart disease decrease.
- Health improvements are seen almost immediately.
- Blood pressure, pulse rate, and breathing patterns start returning to normal soon after quitting.
- People who quit may see an improvement in their overall quality of life.

Some people choose to quit all at once. Other options are nicotine replacement products, such as patches, gum, and nasal sprays. **Do not** use these products without first checking with your caregiver.

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