



Women & Tobacco

Introduction

Approximately 6000 Australian women die prematurely each year as a result of tobacco caused illness.

Sex differences and gender influences tell us that men and women have some differences in behaviour, illness and disease associated with smoking. As such, we should be responding in appropriate ways that take any differences into account when we talk about prevention or treatment.

Sex Differences

There are some differences in the way women and men respond to tobacco and nicotine, and also differences in illness and disease. Some examples include:

- Women and men's bodies break down nicotine differently.
- Women are more likely than men to carry genetic mutations that are associated with an increased risk of lung cancer.
- The type and progression of lung cancer is often different in women.
- Both smoking and passive smoke affect women's reproductive outcomes.
- There is a possibility of an association between active smoking and exposure to passive smoking during adolescence and the later development of breast cancer in women.
- Women often gain more weight after quitting than men.
- Nicotine replacement may be less effective among women as a treatment for tobacco dependence.

Gender Influences

In women, some of the social and cultural aspects that affect roles, behaviours and meanings related to tobacco use or cessation are:

- The tobacco industry has specifically targeted women using sophisticated marketing techniques which include gifts, the Internet, fashion events and alliances with companies that sell products for women.
- Women account for more than 80% of sole parents in Australia. Around 46% of single mothers smoke, and in 1995, the highest smoking rate in this group were single mothers between the ages of 19 and 29 at 59%.
- Young women and girls may use smoking as a method of controlling their appetite and weight.
- Poverty and low income is associated with higher rates of smoking among adults, and women constitute a disproportionate share of people living in poverty.
- Nicotine addiction plays an important role for most smokers. There are also reinforcing cultural and environmental factors for women, such as fear of weight gain and life stressors.
- Smoking is intimately linked with poverty, isolation and the care-giving role.
- When quitting, there are a number of specific situations in which women find it especially difficult to resist smoking. These situations include: socialising with smokers; being near other people who are smoking; when feeling sad, tense or irritable; when they are under pressure from children; and when on the telephone.

Implications for the Future

Future research needs to address both sex and gender differences in relation to:

- patterns of tobacco initiation and use
- nicotine impact, addiction and cessation
- cultural, psychosocial and environmental factors influencing tobacco use and barriers to cessation.

Taking a gendered approach to the development of prevention programs in health promotion and education may improve their effectiveness.

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