

Stub it for good

Health News

By Joanne Yap, [TODAY](#) | Posted: 29 May 2007

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If the recent gory anti-smoking ads haven't persuaded you to stub out that cigarette, perhaps the findings of a new study will. Researchers at the University of Michigan found that smoking has a similar effect on the brain as alcohol does: It impairs one's ability to think.

The study published in the Drug and Alcohol Dependence journal found that puffing on cigarettes had a negative effect on problem-solving skills and memory — especially among men who have a long history of smoking.

Researcher Robert Zucker, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, pointed out that this impact on cognitive skills could stem from the neurochemical effects and damage to the blood vessels in the brain. However, the exact mechanism for smoking's effect on the brain has yet to be determined.

"This is consistent with other findings that people with cardiovascular disease and lung disease tend to have reduced cognitive function," said Professor Zucker.

Dr Stephen Lee, consultant ear, nose and throat surgeon at Raffles Hospital, said that it's still too difficult to draw conclusions about the direct effects that smoking has on the brain, as no databases or disease registries have been established in the study of this particular effect of smoking.

"Smoking is known to have a host of side effects and complications. However, studies with regard to smoking's effect on the brain are generally indirect and mostly epidemiologically-based. This means that any supposed effects are mainly by association and inference," he said.

Dr Lee pointed out that more studies need to be done: "However, there are several studies which show that young male smokers and adolescents in particular, perform poorly in tests of selective and divided attention. Furthermore, working memory is also impaired."

Motivated by my children

Renay Periera decided to quit smoking in 2004 because she was tired of hiding in the bathroom during her frequent cigarette breaks. "I would be standing on the bathtub so that I could stick my head out the window to smoke, as I didn't want the bathroom to smell!

"After a while, I realised how ridiculous this was and how I'd spent most of the last 12 years hiding in the bathroom because of my smoking habit — first from my parents, then from my own children," Renay said.

Yet another wake-up call took the form of a persistent smoker's cough that just would not subside.

A trip to the doctor's ended in tears when she realised that she had developed asthma as a result of her smoking. Her fears heightened when further tests suggested that she could also have emphysema, a lung disease that her grandfather succumbed to.

"The impact of smoking only hits you when you start getting the symptoms. I was worried and told myself that I don't want to leave my kids on their own. I want to be around for them."

So Renay embarked on a plan to quit. Her strategy was to take herself out of her usual routine, so the family packed up for Penang and spent four activity-filled days there. The trip helped her kick start her plan by taking her mind off smoking entirely.

"It was much easier after I came back. I still had some withdrawal symptoms like headaches, but I prepared myself with paracetamol and a list of reasons why I wanted to quit, with my children being at the top of that list."

Renay also set aside the money she spent on cigarettes in a piggy bank, finding herself about \$70 richer at the end of each week — money she put to better use pampering herself with spa visits and massages.

Although she had a short relapse at the beginning of the year, Renay soldiered on and is now back to being smoke-free.

Since quitting, Renay's cough has subsided, her asthma is under control and her overall health has also improved.

"One of the reasons why I continued smoking was that I believed that it kept me thin. But now that I've stopped, I feel healthy both on the outside as well as on the inside. It's no point looking good on the outside while killing yourself inside!"

Myth Busters

Myth: I will feel more stressed after I quit.

Truth: Stress levels are actually significantly reduced in non-smokers.

Myth: Cigarettes keep me awake and alert.

Truth: Although nicotine stimulates the brain 10 seconds into a puff, in between sticks, when nicotine levels are lowered, fatigue sets in, making a smoker feel more tired.

Myth: Smoking helps me stay slim.

Truth: Although some people put on weight after quitting, not everyone does so, especially with a proper diet and weight management plan.

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