Questions and Answers About Smoking and Cancer

Tobacco use, particularly cigarette smoking, is the single most preventable cause of death in the United Kingdom. Cigarette smoking alone is directly responsible for at least one-third of all cancer deaths annually in the United Kingdom, and contributes to the development of low birth weight babies and cardiovascular disease. Quitting smoking can significantly reduce a person's risk of developing heart disease and diseases of the lung, and can limit adverse health effects on unborn children.

What are the effects of cigarette smoking on cancer rates?

Cigarette smoking is the most significant cause of lung cancer and the leading cause of lung cancer death in both men and women. Smoking is also responsible for most cancers of the larynx, oral cavity, and oesophagus. In addition, it is highly associated with the development of, and deaths from, bladder, kidney, pancreatic, and cervical cancers.

Are there any health risks for non-smokers?

The health risks with cigarette smoking are not limited to smokers -- exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) significantly increases a non-smoker's risk of developing lung cancer. (ETS is the smoke that non-smokers are exposed to when they share air space with someone who is smoking.) The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released a risk assessment report in December 1992 in which ETS was classified as a Group A (known human) carcinogen -- a category reserved for only the most dangerous cancer-causing agents. The report estimated that ETS is responsible for lung cancers in several thousand non-smokers each year, and ETS exposure is also linked to severe respiratory problems in infants and young children. More recently, the California Environmental Protection issued a comprehensive report on the health effects of ETS and concluded that ETS is directly related to coronary heart disease.

What harmful chemicals are found in cigarettes?

Tobacco smoke contains thousands of chemical agents, including 60 substances that are known to cause cancer (carcinogens). During smoking, nicotine is absorbed quickly into the bloodstream and travels to the brain, causing an addictive effect. The Surgeon General Reports noted the following conclusions about nicotine: cigarettes and other forms of tobacco are addictive, and the aspects that determine tobacco addiction are similar to those that determine heroin and cocaine addiction.

How does exposure affect the cigarette smoker?

The risk of developing lung and other smoking-associated cancers, as well as non-cancerous diseases, is related to total lifetime exposure to cigarette smoke. This includes the number of cigarettes a person smokes each day, the age at which smoking began, the number of years a person has smoked, and ETS exposure.