Why Do People Smoke?

By Andy Boyles, Science Editor • Illustrated by Bill Colrus

Tom started smoking three years ago, when he was sixteen years old. Four times he has tried to quit. He has not succeeded yet. During each of his first three tries he stayed away from cigarettes for about a week. The fourth time he quit for four months.

Scientists who study our health and habits—we can call them the “disease detectives”—are interested in people like Tom. Their records show that smoking causes more deaths than any other habit.

In the 1960s, the nation began a program to help people stop smoking. And between 1964 and 1990, the number of adult smokers in this country steadily dropped from 42 percent of the population to 26 percent.

The Drop Stopped

But after 1990 the numbers stopped going down. The percentage has stayed at 25 or 26 percent. How can we get the size of this group to shrink even more?

To try to answer that question, disease detectives have studied why the drop stopped. There are just two ways to leave the group that we call smokers: Either quit smoking or die.

The disease detectives have already shown that many smokers die younger than nonsmokers. Also, some adult smokers quit for good every year. So if everything else were to stay the same, the number of smokers should continue to go down.

But everything else has not stayed the same. While some smokers die and others quit, more people are starting to smoke. And most of those new smokers are young.

Kids Who Smoke

To find out how to keep kids away from cigarettes, scientists are studying young smokers.
Disease detectives at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have received some answers through a study called the Teenage Attitudes and Practices Survey. In one part of the study, 9,965 teenagers and twelve-year-olds answered the scientists’ questions by mail or telephone.

In answering one question, more than 38 percent of the young smokers said they thought they could stop smoking whenever they wanted. But in answering another question, 86 percent of them said they had already tried to quit at least once. More than 75 percent of them had tried to quit in the previous six months. Doctors and scientists say that anyone who tries to quit and then returns to smoking is probably addicted. Still, 54 percent of the smokers believed that they would quit smoking within a year.

Another part of the picture comes from a different survey, which is called Monitoring the Future. In this survey, disease detectives at the University of Michigan have been asking questions of thousands of students across the United States every year since 1975. In one part of the study, the scientists asked high-school seniors who smoked if they thought they would still be smoking five years later. More than half of those seniors said they would either “definitely” or “probably” quit. The disease detectives called the same people about five years later. Nearly 60 percent were still smoking just as much as before, or even more.

**Mysterious Addiction**

These surveys show that many kids think cigarettes are not addictive. In fact, the drug in cigarettes, which is called nicotine, is so addictive that it has puzzled scientists. When smokers try to quit, they may feel anxious, irritable, restless, and several other effects, which are called withdrawal symptoms. But these symptoms are not severe enough to make quitting as hard as it is. Some scientists think the secret of nicotine’s power is that it offers short-term solutions to everyday problems, such as stress. Some smokers may not deal with stress in healthful ways, which might include breathing exercises and other ways to relax. Instead, they learn to depend on nicotine, which has a strong, fast calming effect. According to this idea, smokers get hooked because they begin to deal with each stressful situation by smoking a cigarette.
Tom’s story is an example. “I always thought, if I ever started smoking, I could quit whenever I wanted,” he says.
But each time he tried to quit, he went back to smoking because it helped him deal with the stress of family disagreements or problems at school.
“I thought I would just have one,” he says. “But then I was having two, and then three, and then the whole pack. I didn’t want to. It just happened.”
Now Tom has decided to quit again. He realizes that he might go back to smoking. He also knows that some people have succeeded in quitting. And he knows that if he ever quits trying, he will be smoking all his life.

**Adults Are Quitting, But . . .**

From 1964 to 1990, the number of adult smokers in the United States dropped from 42 percent of the population to 26 percent. But then the numbers stopped going down. The reason: Kids are taking up the habit.