

10: peer pressure

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10: Peer Pressure While there are certainly other influences that can lead a smoker into the habit, peer pressure is one of the biggest. A large part of the reason peer pressure comes under scrutiny is that one of the groups most likely to begin smoking -- young teenagers -- is also one of the most susceptible to peer pressure. The awkward years between pure, dependent-on-parents childhood and independent young adulthood are marked for many by frustration and insecurity as status, family roles and physical changes happen in a hormone-addled flood. Quite often, this is the time of life when young people rely most heavily on friends of the same age for social support and affirmation. Enter cigarettes. If a child in a social circle starts experimenting with tobacco, it's all too easy for him or her to lead peers into smoking as well -- the smoker doesn't want to be alone, and the not-yet-smokers don't want to be seen as afraid to try something risky or boundary-pushing.

9: Social Rewards This reason for smoking is tied to peer pressure, although it's a little more complex and has the potential to affect more than just peer-pressure-sensitive tweens and teens. In short, social rewards are the "gifts" people feel they receive when participating in a group activity. Most often, this means some form of acceptance: Smokers at an office building who take cigarette breaks at similar times may bond while they smoke. Likewise, the relationship struck when one smoker asks another, "Got a light?" gives the participants a feeling of acceptance and camaraderie [source: Teen Drug Abuse]. Although many adults mature beyond the need to constantly please their peers, we carry into adulthood the teen's desire to be part of a group. And as smoking becomes more and more restricted, smokers find common ground in complaints over dirty looks

and occasional ridicule from the nonsmoking public and the increasing limits on when and where they can smoke. This only makes the sense of camaraderie -- that social reward -- that much stronger for smokers. For nonsmokers who lack that social bond in their lives, that connection can be enough to drive them through the beginning phases of a tobacco addiction, when the chemical and psychological chains of addiction have yet to lock the smoker into the habit [source: Teen Drug Abuse].

8: Risk-taking Behavior

Adults in countries where smoking is frowned upon are familiar with the no-smoking signs, designated smoking areas and general restrictions on their ability to smoke when and where they wish. But these rules -- legal, physical and social -- can offer tempting lines to cross for young people who tend toward risk-taking behavior. There's a thrill that comes from breaking rules. Combine that with the natural tendency of many teenagers to push the limits of rules imposed by school, parents and their communities, and it's no wonder that many young people will instinctively push against any limit. For some young people, smoking provides fertile ground for getting that limit-pushing thrill. Since it's illegal in many countries for minors to purchase tobacco, the process of obtaining, learning to use and eventually smoking tobacco is full of broken rules from the first step. Teens get thrill after thrill from breaking so many rules, enough so that the rush can overcome the sickening effects of those first few cigarettes.

7: Parental Influence

The relationship between parents smoking and their children smoking is blunt: Children of active smokers are more likely to start smoking than children of nonsmokers, or children of parents who quit smoking. According to some studies, a parent's choice to smoke can more than double the odds that the

child will smoke [source: Faucher]. Even non smoking parents can act in ways that inadvertently make it easier for their children to start smoking. Studies have found that parents who place few restrictions on movies, allowing their children to watch films that depict heavy smoking and drinking, may be setting their children up to be smokers. Likewise, parents who react to smoking as a socially acceptable behavior -- even if they don't smoke -- can leave the door open for their children to experiment with tobacco [source: Hood Center for Children and Families]. What studies of parental influence on smoking suggest is that simply not smoking or quitting may not be enough. Parents committed to raising smoke-free children have to communicate that smoking is dangerous, unhealthy and unacceptable. Even as the children grow into teenagers, those parental messages will resonate, potentially protecting the young adults from becoming addicts as they grow older.

6: Misinformation Tobacco advertising has come under close scrutiny -- and very strict regulation -- in the United States in recent decades. But a mix of popular cultural beliefs, lingering effects of advertising and simple misinformation still abound about tobacco and smoking. In some developed countries, in fact, misinformation about smoking runs very deep and works directly against public health efforts to curb tobacco use. A study of Japanese literature on smoking revealed findings that may seem shocking to some Westerners: Tobacco, in some cases, is promoted as a source for increased health and vitality. Likewise, tobacco's supposed boost to virility is a long-running myth, supported in the U. S. by long-gone ads featuring masculine characters such as the Marlboro Man [source: Kanamori].

Likewise, there are myths that abound among smokers: that so-called "light"

cigarettes are less harmful than others, or that certain brands of cigarette aren't as dangerous as other brands. This attitude may keep them smoking longer, as they switch to "safer" cigarettes, rather than quitting, to try to avoid the health consequences of their addictions [source: The Partnership at Drugfree.org].

5: Genetic Predisposition A large section of the field of modern medical research focuses on genetics, and for good reason: From allergies to blood disorders and certain types of cancer, subtle mutations in a person's genes can mean the difference between sickness and health. Medical genetic research is beginning to suggest, too, that addictions -- including addiction to nicotine, the effective ingredient in tobacco products -- may have a genetic component [source: Benowitz]. Studies of addiction genetics don't necessarily seek a "smoking gun" gene that controls addictions; rather, the research explores how a combination of a genetic susceptibility, societal factors and other health factors, such as alcohol use, can make one person more likely to take up smoking than another. If a tendency toward addiction is seen along family lines or within certain ethnic groups, public health officials can use that information to target their efforts toward populations that have the highest risk for tobacco addiction [sources: Raffin, The Partnership at Drugfree.org].

4: Advertising Research has suggested that, worldwide, tobacco advertising plays a role in the number of people who start or stop smoking. This is not news for public health officials, who, in many nations, began fighting smoking-related illness by restricting tobacco advertising. A 1975 ban on tobacco advertising in Norway, for example, helped reduce long-term smoking prevalence in that nation by 9 percent [source: Willemsen]. Tobacco advertising in the U. S. came under

heavy scrutiny in the late 1990s, when internal tobacco-industry memos suggested that companies may have been targeting potential new smokers -- young adults -- through the use of colorful, catchy ads with stylish cartoon characters, such as Joe Camel. After a series of major court rulings found that the companies bore responsibility for the effects of their products, a portion of the funding that once went into creating these ads was redirected to fund public health and smoking-cessation programs, including ad campaigns encouraging teens not to smoke. While the effectiveness of these campaigns is still being debated and studied, one thing is clear: Advertising is a powerful tool, one that plays a large role in whether people decide to start smoking or not.

3: Self-medication Smokers who are addicted to tobacco report a range of positive sensations that come from smoking a cigarette. These range from reduced tension or appetite to a heightened sense of well-being. Researchers trace these sensations back to the flood of chemicals released into the nervous system by nicotine. Just like any prescription or illicit drug, it changes the body's chemistry and functioning when it enters the system. For some, smoking is essentially a way to self-medicate for illnesses that cause tension and pain. Patients suffering from some forms of mental illness, such as depression or anxiety disorders, may take up smoking because it can help mitigate some of their symptoms [source: Lillard]. But as is the case with many powerful drugs, using nicotine to manage medical conditions comes with a host of negative side effects. Beyond addiction, the risks of lung disease, cancer, heart disease and early death mean nicotine, while potentially effective in treating some disease symptoms, is truly a double-edged sword when used to self-medicate.

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Media Influences Like advertising, media can exert a significant influence on viewers' decision-making. One only has to look at how hairstyles or clothing fashions can be launched by a single movie or TV episode to see the extent of this power in many parts of the world. Smoking in the media can have the same influence as fashion or the appearance of a trendy gadget in an actor's hand. Studies have suggested that when young viewers see a main character smoking, they're more likely to see smoking as something socially acceptable, stylish and desirable. Adding to this problem is what some researchers see as the media over-representing smoking: By some estimates, a disproportionately large number of film characters smoke [source: Watson]. Pressure from antismoking groups has reduced the prevalence of smoking onscreen in recent years, and this effort, as part of a holistic campaign to remove smoking as a socially acceptable habit in the public eye, could be a key factor in reducing the number of people who take up smoking in the future.

1: Stress Relief For people not suffering from severe mental illness, cigarettes may still become a form of self-medication. For decades, soldiers have taken up smoking on the battlefield to deal with wartime stress, for example. Many people experiencing much lower levels of stress -- in a high-pressure job, for example -- may start to smoke as a way to manage the tension and nerves associated with the situation. Unfortunately, these people may find that they can't easily give up tobacco once the stress passes. The tobacco becomes a psychological -- as well as chemical -- crutch, as any potentially stressful situation sends them instinctively reaching for a cigarette. The tool they had used to alleviate stress suddenly becomes a stressor in itself, as they shift from fighting

through a difficult situation with the help of nicotine to fighting the nicotine itself [source: Cleveland Clinic].