The health consequences of smoking have been studied for over half a century. Results of this research have led to cigarette smoking being identified as a major risk factor for several diseases including chronic bronchitis, coronary heart disease and lung cancer. The status of smoking behaviour has been documented through national surveys and the effects of smoking on longevity have been calculated using a combination of American mortality ratios and Canadian prevalence rates. Results of these efforts are presented in this update.

Smoking Behaviour in Canada

- Results of the 1990 Canada Health Promotion Survey revealed that 29% of Canadians smoked cigarettes. This is the equivalent of 5.8 million persons.
- More men smoke than women.
- For both sexes, prevalence of smoking is highest for those aged 24-44 years, those with less education, those with lower income, and blue-collar workers.
- The prevalence of smoking has decreased by 30 percentage points for men between 1965 and 1990, and by 10 percentage points for women during the same period.
- More men than women have quit smoking.
- Over 80% of smokers believe that stopping smoking will help improve their health and well being.
- Over one-third of Canadians describe themselves as former smokers.
- In a 10 year follow-up to the Nutrition Canada survey, it has been estimated that 39% of all mortality in men aged 35-79 years was attributable to smoking.

Smoking and Life Expectancy

Recent work applying U.S. mortality rates to the Canadian smoking population has resulted in the construction of mortality rates and life tables for the Canadian population. Results of this research indicate that increased mortality among smokers is not a result of chance. For Canadians smoking was found to reduce life expectancy at all ages. At age 35 years, the life expectancy is reduced from 10-20% for current smokers.

Key Findings

- The reduction in life expectancy for a 35-year-old male current smoker was 8.05 years, whereas for a 35 year old female current smoker it was 5.28 years.
- The reduction in life expectancy for a 35-year-old former smoker was 3.8 years, whereas for a 35-year-old female former smoker was 2.0 years.
- For the Canadian population as a whole, smoking reduces life expectancy at age 35 by about 4.5 years for men and 1.5 years for women.

In Summary

- Smoking reduces life expectancy at all ages.
- Persons who have never smoked have the highest life expectancy at all age levels.
- Current smokers have the lowest life expectancy at all age levels.
- The impact on life expectancy lost by smoking differs between men and women.
- The benefits of smoking cessation are clearly visible in terms of life expectancy.
- The finding that, at age 35 years, there seems to be a 10-20% reduction in life expectancy should be of both personal and public concern.

For More Information


By Kerry Mummery, MSc.
This issue was published in conjunction with the Alberta Cancer Board, Division of Epidemiology, Prevention and Screening.