



Contact: Pam McKeown
(405) 522-5102

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TOBACCO: FIRST PUFF, CHEW CAN HAVE LIFELONG IMPLICATIONS

Cigarettes, cigars and smokeless tobacco may seem “cool” to kids, but taking that first puff or chew can have significant consequences, says Oklahoma’s deputy commissioner for substance abuse services.

“Life expectancy of smokers is 14 years less than non-smokers, and tobacco use can lead to experimentation with alcohol and other drugs, which can have lifelong implications,” said Ben Brown, Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. “For many young people, beer and cigarettes go together. Smokers, in fact, are 10 times more likely to develop alcoholism. Regardless of the means of ingestion, tobacco is a drug that can lead to alcohol and other drug use.”

Brown said parents must recognize the dangers of smoking, especially if they themselves use tobacco products. Not only do children in such households suffer from exposure to the more than 40 chemicals in second-hand smoke (which kills 750 Oklahomans a year), but kids also mimic their parents’ behaviors. “If you smoke, odds are they will, too.”

Parents, he added, have major influence over their children's choices. "It may not seem like they're listening, but they are. Kids respect, listen to and model their parents'

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behaviors. Youth need a clear message – no inhalants, marijuana or other illicit drugs, no tobacco, no alcohol."

In Oklahoma, 67 percent of ninth through 12th graders say they have tried smoking. Nearly 30 percent reported smoking cigarettes regularly, compared with 25 percent of students nationally. Also, 9.1 percent of Oklahoma high schoolers report using smokeless tobacco, compared with 7.8 percent of students nationwide.

"We as a state are damaging the health of our citizens when nearly a third of our high school students say they smoke regularly," Brown said. "Every year, more than 14,000 of our youth become addicted to tobacco. At least one-third of these children will die early because of their addiction."

Smoking, he added, also may lead to lifelong dependence on alcohol and other drugs. "People who begin smoking before age 13 are much more likely to have drug and alcohol problems, as well as a lifetime diagnosis of major depression. Adolescents who smoke are three times more likely to have consumed alcohol, eight times more likely to have smoked marijuana, and 22 times more likely to have used cocaine in the past 30 days than non-smokers.

"Drug users typically report having started drinking beer by age 13 as well as using tobacco before age 12," he said. "Clearly, a link exists."

For adults, a connection between tobacco and alcohol also exists. While 25 percent of the general population smokes, more than 90 percent of heavy drinkers do. Studies have shown that nicotine can trigger a craving for alcohol, Brown said.

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It is time Oklahomans get involved in reducing tobacco use.

“Cigarettes, smokeless tobacco and beer are bought from retail establishments licensed by the state,” he said. “Thirty-four percent of youth report buying cigarettes at a store where the clerk hands out the cigarettes. Clerks and owners of convenience stores, gasoline stations, grocery stores and other places that sell these items to our children are dealing illegal drugs to our children. At the local level, I would call on police departments to enforce compliance checks and on parents to keep tabs on where their kids are getting cigarettes.”

Another factor to consider is a “quality of life” issue.

“Cancers of all types, respiratory illnesses, heart disease – these are all caused by smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke. That’s not to mention all the money spent to support this habit – even a moderate smoker can easily spend more than \$1,500 a year on cigarettes. Most families would love to have that much extra money to spend.”

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