

T O B A C C O

What is tobacco?

Tobacco is a plant that contains the drug nicotine. The leaves of the tobacco plant can be prepared for smoking, chewing or inhaling. People have used tobacco, or other plants that contain nicotine, for many centuries.

Tobacco use was introduced to Europe by Christopher Columbus and other explorers returning from the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries,¹ and was brought to England by Sir Walter Raleigh during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.² Not everyone thought that tobacco was a good thing, and its use was controversial. King James I, who took the throne after Elizabeth, called it 'a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs'. Some things don't change!³

In those early days, tobacco was smoked in pipes, by both men and women. But fashions changed, and in the 1700s, men and women in high society preferred to take their tobacco ground into a powder called snuff, which they inhaled. The habit of smoking tobacco rolled into cigars and cigarettes became fashionable amongst men in the late 1700s, and snuff-taking became less popular. As this new way of smoking was never seen as acceptable for women to do, in time tobacco use became a male-only pursuit. During the 1800s elegant society frowned upon women even sniffing tobacco smoke. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert banned tobacco from their palaces. When new mansions were built, they included a smoking room so that the man of the house could withdraw from female company, put on his smoking cap and jacket, and use tobacco in privacy.³

In the early years tobacco was also used in medicine, and was recommended for treating asthma and other illnesses. In 1828 nicotine was isolated from tobacco, and shown to be extremely poisonous. After that, doctors seldom prescribed tobacco and some claimed all sorts of sickness were caused by it including congestion of the brain, and cancer.³

Tobacco arrives in the colonies

The smoking habits of the English were brought to Australia with the earliest convict settlements, and convict ships often picked up tobacco from Brazil on their way to the new colony. Tobacco was demanded by soldiers, free settlers and convicts alike, and it was necessary to provide it to keep order in the colony. Tobacco was so valued that it was sometimes used as money.³ People smoked their tobacco in pipes, or chewed it.

Aboriginal groups already had their own way of getting nicotine, long before white settlement. Leaves from a number of native Australian plants containing nicotine could be mixed with a particular ash, which made them release nicotine when chewed. However as this kind of tobacco only became available at certain times of the year, the introduced tobacco became popular among Aboriginal groups, and was used by the white settlers as a form of bribe, payment or reward.³

A new way to smoke

In the late 1900s, machines were invented which could mass produce cigarettes. The development of the manufactured cigarette changed smoking habits forever. These new cigarettes were convenient to use and widely available, making it easier for people to smoke more. People also inhaled the cigarette smoke deep into their lungs, as this was the best way to get the nicotine into their system. Cigarettes became very popular among the soldiers during the First World War,³ and following the war, more and more people began to smoke cigarettes. It also became more socially acceptable for women to smoke. After the Second World War, three-quarters of the male adult population, and one-quarter of adult females were smokers.⁴ Everybody seemed to be doing it - movie stars, sporting heroes, even doctors⁵ were shown in cigarette advertisements. It was not yet understood that cigarettes are also highly addictive and deadly. The medical evidence about smoking and disease did not become clear until the 1950s.^{6,7}

Tobacco or health?

During the 1920s and 1930s doctors and scientists began to notice that more patients were developing lung cancer.^{8,9} Until then, lung cancer had been an unusual disease. In 1950, research from the United States of America and Britain identified smoking, and especially cigarette smoking, as the cause of the rise in the amount of lung cancer.^{6,7} Research in the following decades has confirmed these findings, and shown that cigarette smoking is also a major cause of heart disease, a number of other kinds of cancer, lung disease and many other health problems. Even breathing in someone else's cigarette smoke gives small children chest and breathing problems, and is a cause of lung cancer¹⁰ and heart disease.¹¹

Cigarette use is therefore the result of a tragic accident of history. The true extent of tobacco's health dangers was only understood well after its use was wide-spread. This fact, and the fact that cigarettes are made by large and powerful companies which have gone to great lengths to protect their business interests, have made it very difficult for health measures to be introduced to improve community health.

A healthy response

Once the evidence that smoking was dangerous became clear, Australian medical and health organisations called for Government action, recommending that tobacco advertising be restricted or banned, and that health education campaigns be introduced.³ However it was not until the 1970s that the government focussed on tobacco. In 1972, for the first time, a health warning had to be printed on cigarette packages, and advertising on television and radio stopped in 1976 (although the tobacco companies have managed to keep their names on television screens by sponsoring sports).

The 1980s saw greater activity by State Governments and the Federal Government. Laws were introduced which banned most remaining forms of tobacco advertising. The knowledge that passive smoking is dangerous to health has meant that many places, especially workplaces, no longer permit smoking. Education campaigns, some funded by an extra tax on the sales of tobacco, are now run in all states. And smoking rates in the community are going down.¹²

A battle not yet won

But the battle against death and disease caused by smoking is far from over. Tobacco smoking is still the largest single preventable cause of death and disease in Australia today. Smoking is estimated to have caused 18,920 deaths in Australia in 1992,¹³ nearly nine times the number of road crash fatalities.¹⁴

What can be done? Why do people start smoking in the first place, and what makes them keep on smoking? What's the best way to quit? Why do the tobacco companies oppose healthy public policy, and what does it mean for the Government? You will find out answers to all these questions and more in the following Tobacco Action Pack (TAP) units. But first, let's see what you know about tobacco already.

TAP Pack quiz

True or false?

1. There are more smokers than non-smokers in Australia.
2. Farmers once used tobacco as sheep dip.
3. Over 57,000 reports have been published on the connection between smoking and disease.
4. Smoking does not affect you until you are over 30.
5. Tobacco growing was banned in the early years of white settlement in Australia.
6. Cigarettes can be addictive.
7. Smoking makes men more fertile.

8. Cigarettes contain some of the same ingredients found in nail polish remover, rocket fuel and floor cleaner.
9. More people die from drinking alcohol than using tobacco.
10. Tobacco advertisements have been banned on television for over 15 years.
11. Air pollution causes most lung cancer in Australia.
12. Passive smoking annoys some people, but doesn't cause any health problems.
13. Elle MacPherson signed a million-dollar contract to let her name be used as a cigarette brand.
14. Most smokers would like to quit.
15. Teenage smokers cough more than teenagers who don't smoke.
16. Most people prefer to work in an environment free of tobacco smoke.
17. One in three people who smoke will die from disease caused by smoking.
18. The simple solution to the tobacco problem is banning smoking.

Answers:

1. False. Around a quarter of adult Australians are smokers. See TAP 3
2. True. Nicotine, the powerful drug found in tobacco, has also been used as a pesticide. See TAP 2.
3. True. In fact one major review has stated that 'It is safe to say that smoking represents the most extensively documented cause of disease ever investigated in the history of biomedical research'. See TAP 4.
4. False. Even younger smokers cough more and have more lung infections than non-smokers. See TAP 4.
5. True. For a time, food crops were considered a priority and the government banned growing tobacco. See TAP 8.
6. True. Like heroin and cocaine, the drug nicotine, found in tobacco, is highly addictive. See TAP 6.
7. False. Smoking can effect blood supply to the penis, making it difficult to get and sustain an erection. It also effects sperm production. See TAP 4.
8. True. And there are over 4,000 chemicals found in tobacco smoke, including chemicals known to cause cancer. See TAP 3
9. False. Tobacco is the number one drug killer in our society, accounting for 80% of all drug-caused deaths. See TAP 4.
10. True. But if you watch sporting programs, you can still see tobacco advertising. Tobacco companies have managed to keep their brand names on television screens by sponsoring sport. See TAP 7.

11. False. Tobacco use is the main cause of lung cancer in Australia. Most people who die of lung cancer are smokers. See TAP 4.

12. False. Passive smoking certainly does annoy some people, but it also causes serious health problems. Children exposed to passive smoking are more likely to get chest infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia, to get asthma, and to have lungs that develop less well. Passive smoking is also a cause of lung cancer and heart disease. See TAP 5.

13. False. When one of the cigarette companies launched a cigarette brand called 'Elle', Elle MacPherson announced publicly that she had nothing to do with the brand.

14. True. Most smokers know that tobacco isn't doing them any good, and that it also affects those around them. See TAP 6.

15. True. Smoking damages the lungs' self-cleaning system, making even young smokers more open to coughs and chest infections. See TAP 4.

16. True. And more and more workplaces are going smokefree. See TAP 9 for more information.

17. True. Not very good odds, are they? See TAP 4.

18. False. It would be impossible to ban a product that is so widely used, and to do so, would cause more problems than it solved. The best way of solving the problems caused by tobacco in the community is to introduce a comprehensive policy that deals with tobacco at a number of levels. You can read more about this in TAP 10.

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