



Frequently Asked Questions

'Sponge'

What is the focus of the 'Sponge' campaign?

In the campaign, a sponge is used to demonstrate the amount of cancer-producing tar which goes into the lungs of a person who smokes a pack-a-day over the course of one year. A pair of hands wrings out the tar-blackened sponge as it flows into a beaker.

The campaign, originally by Cancer Institute NSW, is a remake of the original 1979 television advertisement that was so successful in its day that tobacco lobbyists attempted to have it banned. 'Sponge' aims to get people who smoke thinking about the negative and immediate effect each cigarette is having on their health and act towards quitting.

Is the tar in tobacco smoke like the tar on roads?

No. The tar in tobacco smoke is dark and sticky but it is not the same substance as the tar on roads.

What is tar?

Tobacco smoke contains more than 7,000 chemical compounds in the form of hot gases and millions of tiny particles (also known as aerosols), 69 of which can cause cancer.¹ Tar is the common name for all those particles. Tar stands for Total Aerosol Residue.

Each particle in tar is composed of a large variety of chemical compounds, many of which are known to cause cancer and other deadly diseases.

What happens to the tar when you smoke?

When you burn tobacco by lighting a cigarette, the smoke coming off the burning tip contains tar. The smoke eventually disappears but the tar coats all the surfaces that the smoke comes into contact with. That's why your clothes and hair feel sticky and smell if you have been around cigarette smoke.

Some of the smoke is breathed in by the other people around the person who is smoking, and so tar gets into their bodies too. But it is the person who smokes who takes in most of the tar.

Is that what tar really looks like?

Yes. When the tar in tobacco smoke condenses on a surface, you can see that it is a sticky brown substance.

You can see tar on the filter of a cigarette after it has been smoked. You can see how white walls turn a dirty yellow colour in rooms where smoking takes place regularly. You can see the yellow or brown stains on the fingers and teeth of people who smoke.

What you can't see is the place where most tar collects - the lungs of people who smoke - unless an autopsy is performed after the person dies.

What about the filters on cigarettes – don't they stop the tar getting into your body?

No. Filters only stop some of the tar getting into your body. Most cigarette filters are made of the same material as camera film (cellulose acetate) and are made up of thousands of tiny fibers – which can also be inhaled into your lungs during smoking and cause further damage.



Where does the tar go when it is in your body?

The tar makes contact first with the nose and the lips, then the mouth, then the throat on its way into the body. Tar in tobacco smoke is the leading cause of cancer inside the nose, mouth and throat.

Some of the tar that is deposited in the mouth is then swallowed. Tar-laden saliva gets into the oesophagus (gullet) and then the stomach and causes cancer in both places. When the smoke is inhaled, it damages the lining of the airways leading to the lungs, including the 'cilia', which are fine hairs that line your upper airways and help to protect against infection. When cilia are damaged, tar can penetrate further into your lungs, where it can cause lung cancer.

The particles of tar can block the tiny airways leading to further damage by infections including chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Some of the tar deposited in the lungs is then absorbed through the lungs into the bloodstream and then travels everywhere in the body, harming nearly every organ of the human body.

Smoking is known to cause 16 different types of cancer including cancer of the bone marrow (myeloid leukemia), pancreas, bladder, kidneys, liver and cervix.²

But most people who smoke don't get lung cancer.

No. Most people who smoke die of other things first, often caused by smoking.

What happens to the tar when you stop smoking?

As soon as you stop smoking, your body starts to recover. The cilia that have not been destroyed but only paralysed start to come to life again and help you cough up some of the tar stuck in the airways. Conditions that are exacerbated by smoking, such as asthma can also improve. The sooner you stop, the better your chances of recovering.

Where can people who smoke get help to stop smoking?

- Call the Quitline on 13 7848, Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm or fill out the online [Request a callback form](#) and a Quitline counsellor will call you.
- Visit quit.org.au/quitisheretohelp for more information on how Quitline can help.
- Seek advice and support from [your doctor](#).
- Use the online tools and information available at quit.org.au.

Quitline (13 7848) is a culturally safe space

- We have information in [Arabic](#), [Chinese](#) and [Vietnamese](#), and a Quitline counsellor can speak with you in these languages through an interpreter.
- You can ask to yarn with an [Aboriginal Quitline](#) counsellor.
- We also work with the [LGBTIQ+ community](#) - Quitline counsellors can chat with you in a culturally appropriate and accessible way and you'll find peers working in the service.
- If you are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment, you can call the National Relay Service to access the Quitline. For options click [here](#).
- If you speak a language other than English (LOTE), you can chat with a Quitline counsellor through our [interpreter service](#).

For more information including the latest research about smoking and health visit [Tobacco in Australia](#).

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *The Health Consequences of Smoking—50 Years of Progress: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic.

² WHO International Agency for Research on Cancer (2004). *Monograph on the evaluation of carcinogenic risks to humans, Volume 83: Tobacco Smoke and Involuntary smoking*. Lyon, France.