Cigarette smoking and health outcomes among college students

**MAJOR FINDINGS:**

A four-year study of 1,253 college students investigated what effects smoking during college would have on health outcomes in young adulthood. First, researchers grouped individuals by their smoking pattern over the four years. Most study participants (72%) did not smoke, and the remaining participants were classified into different groups based on their four-year smoking pattern: “low-stable”, “high-stable”, “low-increasing”, and “high-decreasing” (see Figure 1). The majority of the smokers were in the “low-stable” category, making up 13% of the total sample, and the least common of all were the “high-decreasing” smokers (3%). Most first-year infrequent smokers were able to maintain that low level throughout four years. However, a higher smoking frequency during the first year (as measured by the number of smoking days within the past month) increased chances of becoming a frequent smoker by the fourth year.

![Figure 1. Cigarette Smoking Trajectories: Number of Smoking Days in the Past Month](image)

Most importantly, results showed significant differences in health outcomes during the fourth year between students with different smoking patterns. Namely, students with more frequent smoking histories fared worse with respect to self-reported health status, number of days ill, and number of provider visits for physical health problems. For example, by the fourth year, high-stable smokers and low-increasers were significantly more likely to rate their health status as “fair” or “poor” (as opposed to “excellent” or good”) compared to the other groups (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Likelihood of Self-reported Fair/Poor Health Status by Smoking Trajectory](image)
Practice and Policy Suggestions: Although tobacco use has been declining among youth for the last decade, smoking continues to be a costly public health burden. Health care providers who treat college-age patients should discuss the negative impacts of smoking, even if the patient reports using infrequently, or claims only to “smoke socially.”

College administrators should make smoking cessation resources visible and accessible for college students, including interventions such as web-based programs and contingency management. Some students might see the transition to college as an opportunity for a “fresh start,” so one promising strategy might be to design smoking-cessation interventions that take advantage of this mentality by targeting incoming first-year students.


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