

# Mentally ill smoke at 4 times the rate of general population

October 7 2008

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Australians with mental illness smoke at four times the rate of the general population, says a new study from the University of Melbourne.

The study, published today in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, says despite smoking halving among Australia's general population over the past 20 years there has been little change in smoking rates among people with psychiatric disabilities.

Study author Kristen Moeller-Saxone from the University of Melbourne's Melbourne School of Population Health, says smoking rates remain high even though three quarters of those involved in the study said they wanted to quit or cut down on cigarettes.

Ms Moeller-Saxone's study surveyed 280 clients of a psychiatric support service – most of whom had schizophrenia - in Melbourne's northern suburbs.

It found that found that more than six in 10 (or 62 per cent) of those surveyed smoked, compared to fewer than two in 10 (16 per cent) members of the general population.

It also found that:

- Smokers with mental illness consumed 50 per cent more cigarettes a day than the general population, averaging 22 cigarettes a day;
- The heaviest smokers in the group smoked up to 80 cigarettes in a day;

- Almost three in five (59 per cent) said they wanted to quit smoking;
- Almost three quarters (74 per cent) said they wanted to cut down;
- One in 10 (12 per cent) had successfully given up smoking; and
- Smokers with mental illness were almost three times more likely to consume illegal tobacco.

Ms Moeller-Saxone said the study showed the need for specialist services to help people with mental illness stop smoking.

She said previous research by SANE Australia and ACCESS economics showed smoking among people with mental illness cost Australia more than \$30 billion a year.

"Smoking compounds many of the health problems already experienced by people with mental illnesses," she said. "Combined with drug therapies that often make them overweight, they are at even greater risk of diabetes, heart attacks and strokes if they smoke.

"The biggest cause of death among people with mental illness is not suicide, it is cardiovascular disease."

Ms Moeller-Saxone said smoking also placed a big financial imposition on many people with mental illness, some of whom spent more than 20 per cent of their income on cigarettes.

However, governments had provided very little support for quit programs among the mentally ill.

"This is typified by the current Victorian Tobacco Control Strategy which doesn't specifically recognise the mentally ill as a group to be specifically targeted," she said.

"We really need to focus on people with mental illness as a specialist sub-

group which needs tailored support rather than just including them with other socially disadvantaged groups."

Ms Moeller-Saxone said her study also showed that helping people with mental illness to cut down, rather than quit straight away, may also be a good strategy for reducing smoking rates.

Source: University of Melbourne

Citation: Mentally ill smoke at 4 times the rate of general population (2008, October 7) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-10-mentally-ill-population.html>

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