

More good news on teen smoking: Rates at or near record lows

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Cigarette smoking rates among American teens in 2008 are at the lowest levels since at least as far back as the early 1990s, according to the Monitoring the Future study based at the University of Michigan, which has been surveying national samples of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students each year since 1991.

Monitoring the Future tracks tobacco use with surveys administered to a national sample of more than 45,000 students in about 400 secondary schools each year. This year represents the low point for smoking in all three grades. The proportions of students indicating any smoking in the prior 30 days (called "monthly prevalence") stands at 7 percent, 12 percent, and 20 percent in grades 8, 10, and 12, respectively.

These rates reflect large declines since the recent peaks in the mid-1990s: 8th graders' smoking rates are down by two thirds, 10th graders' by more than half, and 12th graders' by nearly half.

"I can't begin to tell you what a dramatic difference this is going to make in the health and longevity of this generation," said Lloyd Johnston, the study's principal investigator. "The fact that teen smoking is still declining is particularly encouraging, because a couple of years ago it looked like the long decline in youth smoking might be coming to an end."

Across the three grades combined, there was a statistically significant decline in monthly smoking prevalence from 13.6 percent in 2007 to

12.6 percent in 2008. All grades showed some decline this year, but it was greatest in the upper grades. This year's declines are also greatest among males and students who say they are college-bound.

The study has actually tracked the smoking behavior of 12th graders for a considerably longer period, going back to 1975. Their smoking rate today is the lowest it has been over that entire 33-year period.

The investigators note that in the early 1990s, cigarette smoking was making a rapid comeback among American teens, one to which the study drew considerable public attention. Many governmental and other institutional responses to the growing threat followed, perhaps the most important of which was the tobacco settlement between the industry and the state attorneys general.

That settlement brought about some immediate changes in cigarette advertising in the country, including the termination of the Joe Camel ads, and it launched the American Legacy Foundation, which has sponsored national antismoking ad campaigns aimed at youth in the years since. It also forced the tobacco companies to raise the price of cigarettes considerably in order to cover the costs of the settlement, and increasing the price has been shown to be a deterrent to youth smoking. A number of states and some municipalities have raised prices still further by increasing their excise taxes on tobacco.

One important reason that smoking rates have been dropping for over 10 years is that fewer students even try cigarettes. The proportion of 8th graders who ever smoked a cigarette is down from 49 percent in 1996 to 21 percent in 2008—a decline of nearly six tenths.

Attitudes about smoking

One aspect that has proven to influence the likelihood that young people

use a drug is their belief about whether its use poses a danger for the user. For cigarettes, there has been a substantial increase since 1995 in the proportions of teens who see pack-a-day smoking as involving "great risk" to the smoker.

And the proportions of teens who said that they "disapproved" of pack-a-day smoking began to rise a year later and continued into recent years. However, the increase in perceived risk did not continue into 2008; indeed, there was a significant decline in this measure in 2008 among 12th graders. Disapproval of smoking, while quite high, appears to have leveled off in 2008, as well.

The great majority of teens today say that they "prefer to date people who don't smoke": 83 percent, 80 percent, and 75 percent in grades 8, 10, and 12, and nearly two thirds of them think that "becoming a smoker reflects poor judgment."

These attitudes became more widespread after the mid-1990s, but have not grown much over the past few years, except in 12th grade, where the earlier cohorts of 8th graders are still working their way up the age spectrum, bringing their more disapproving attitudes toward cigarette smoking with them. The investigators say that teens should take note that becoming a smoker will make them less attractive to the great majority of the opposite sex—a high price to pay.

Availability of cigarettes to teens

The proportion of teens reporting that they could get cigarettes "fairly easily" or "very easily," if they wanted some, has been declining for some years, particularly among younger teens. Today, 57 percent of 8th graders—most of whom are 13 or 14 years old—say they could get cigarettes fairly easily.

As high as that number is, it is down considerably from 77 percent in 1996. Availability for 10th graders is higher, as might be expected, but fewer of them say they could get cigarettes easily in 2008 (77 percent) than in 1996 (91 percent). It appears that the efforts of many states and communities to get retail outlets to stop selling to underage smokers have been having some success, the researchers say. Despite that, however, the majority of teens—even younger teens—still say that they can get cigarettes if they want them.

Smokeless tobacco

Like cigarettes, the 30-day prevalence of using smokeless or "spit" tobacco reached a recent peak in the mid-1990s and then declined. All three grade levels have shown a reduction of about one half in their 30-day prevalence rates since those peak levels, but the declines appear to have ended in all grades, and use remained fairly level this year.

At present, the prevalence rates for any use of smokeless tobacco in the prior 30 days are 4 percent, 5 percent, and 7 percent in grades 8, 10, and 12, respectively. That means that one in every 15 high school seniors is a current user of smokeless tobacco. However, among boys, who account for almost all smokeless tobacco use, the rates are considerably higher: 6 percent, 8 percent, and 12 percent. In other words, nearly one in eight boys in 12th grade is a current user of smokeless tobacco.

Provided by University of Michigan

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