

Medicare expands coverage to help smokers quit

August 28 2010, By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Even though they've lived with the health warnings much of their lives and doubtless seen the ill effects on friends, relatives and even themselves, about 4.5 million older Americans continue to smoke.

Finally, Medicare is catching up to most [private insurers](#) by providing counseling for any beneficiary who's trying to quit smoking. Dr. Barry Straube, the program's chief medical officer, says it's never too late, even for lifelong [smokers](#).

"The elderly can respond to smoking cessation counseling even if they have been smoking for 30 years or more," says Straube. "We do know we can see a reduction in the death rate and complications from smoking-related illnesses." Not only cancer, heart disease and lung problems, which can kill, but also gastric reflux, osteoporosis and other ailments that undermine quality of life.

Medicare already covers drugs used to help smokers quit, as well as counseling for those who have developed a smoking-related illness. But starting immediately, the program will expand the benefit to cover up to eight counseling sessions a year for any beneficiary who wants to quit. And next year, such counseling will be cost-free, under a provision in President Barack Obama's health care law that eliminates co-payments for preventive services.

Older smokers often don't get as much attention from doctors as do

younger ones. "They just figure, 'Well, it's too late,'" said Straube. That may start to change now.

About one in 10 seniors smoke, compared with one in five people among the U.S. population as a whole. It turns out that smokers age 65 and older present a medical paradox.

Many started when it was fashionable to light up. They are more likely than younger smokers to be seriously hooked on [nicotine](#) and less likely to attempt quitting. But research shows that their odds of success are greater if they do try to give up the habit.

And older smokers who receive counseling are significantly more likely to quit than those who only get standard medical care. One study of elderly heart attack patients found that those who got counseling to help quit smoking were more likely to be alive five years later.

It's unclear why older people who try to quit have better luck than younger smokers.

Some experts think it's because older smokers are more motivated, perhaps from having seen a loved one die of cancer or [heart disease](#), or by recognizing how the cigarette habit has left its mark in their own bodies, anything from wrinklier skin to shortness of breath.

Straube has his own theory: "They're under less stress," he said. "They are not working anymore, and they have more time."

Medicare's new [smoking cessation](#) benefit will also be available to younger people who are covered by the program because of a disability. About 1 million of them are smokers.

More information: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

<http://tinyurl.com/ya5jlv1>

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