

## 'John, smoking is dangerous' sometimes works better than 'smoking is dangerous'

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"Dear John, due to smoking you have a higher chance of developing lung cancer than if you would not smoke." People who have smoked for a longer period of time and who read such a personalised warning are especially more inclined to stop smoking than if they receive a general warning. So concludes NWO-funded health scientist Arie Dijkstra. His research demonstrates that smokers differ strongly in their responses to information.

Dijkstra showed smoking students different texts about the dangers of smoking. In one of the texts they were spoken to personally about the serious [health problems](#) they risk as a smoker. Although the study subjects knew that a computer had simply added their name to the article, all of them responded strongly to this. Students who had smoked for three years or less showed an adverse reaction: reading the text with their name in it made them less inclined to [stop smoking](#). Conversely, students who had been smoking for more than five years were more inclined to stop smoking after reading such a text.

"The outcomes of my research showed differences in how various groups of smokers respond to [health information](#)," says Dijkstra. "Policy makers need to realise that the effect of an information campaign can differ between target groups: one group will stop whereas another will not stop."

According to Dijkstra smoking cessation courses and lifestyle programmes would be more effective if they took these differences

between people into account. He thinks that stating the name of a person can, for example, be put to good use in Internet courses for [smoking cessation](#) or slimming. "A good "tailored advice" programme can add a person's first name for the target group that is sensitive to that and omit it in the case of people who would respond adversely. Technology can therefore be used help us inform people more effectively."

Dijkstra also presented the study subjects with texts which stated that smokers more often cause fires and are responsible for deforestation due to the construction of tobacco plantations. These texts, both with and without the names of the reader, failed to make an impact on any of [smokers](#). Dijkstra: "Using such arguments to persuade people to stop smoking clearly does not work."

The article about Dijkstra's research was published this week in *British Journal of Health Psychology*. Dijkstra works at the University of Groningen.

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