

Seniors with serious illness find smoking, drinking tough habits to break

July 31 2012

A recent [study](#) of adults age 50 to 85 found that only 19 percent of those diagnosed with lung disease quit smoking within two years. Furthermore, the research showed that the vast majority of older adults who learn they have a chronic condition do not adopt healthier behaviors, according to data presented in the *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*.

The statistics come from the Health and Retirement Study, an ongoing survey of over 11,000 Americans aged 50 or older that began in 1992. For the new journal article, a research team led by Jason T. Newsom, PhD, at Portland State University sought to determine to what degree these adults modified their smoking, drinking, and exercise behaviors after the diagnosis of heart disease, cancer, stroke, respiratory disease, and diabetes.

"Even after an illness has occurred, change in behavior is critical for improving quality of life, reducing risk of recurrence or complications, and extending life," Newsom said. "Quitting smoking after a heart attack, for example, cuts risk of a second heart attack in half."

The largest observed change in behavior was among those who were diagnosed with heart disease, which led 40 percent of smokers to quit. For every disease, smokers decreased the number of cigarettes consumed per day, but only 19 percent of those suffering from lung disease quit.

There were no significant improvements in the percentage reporting regular [vigorous exercise](#) (at least three times per week) following the diagnosis of any [chronic condition](#). In fact, the percentage exercising declined significantly for those with cancer, lung disease, and stroke — although this may be due to the physical limitations that can be associated with those conditions.

Changes in alcohol consumption were small, although among those who were currently drinking, those with heart disease, diabetes, cancer, stroke, and [lung disease](#) significantly decreased their average number of daily drinks.

Additionally, there were few significant and consistent socio-demographic changes after diagnosis. Women and younger participants were somewhat more likely to decrease exercise and alcohol use. Higher education was associated with smoking cessation, increased exercise, and decreased alcohol consumption.

This research was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Aging.

"The results provide important new information on health behavior changes among those with chronic disease and suggest that intensive efforts are required to help initiate and maintain lifestyle improvements among this population," the authors state.

Provided by The Gerontological Society of America

Citation: Seniors with serious illness find smoking, drinking tough habits to break (2012, July 31) retrieved 16 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-07-seniors-illness-tough-habits.html>

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