

Digitally aged photos encourage young smokers to quit

April 9 2013, by Carley Tonoli



Digitally-aged image demonstrating the effects of smoking (non-smoker on left, smoker on right). Credit: Curtin University

Showing young people computer-generated images illustrating the effects of smoking on their appearance later in life may encourage them to quit, a new study has found.

The findings are published in the latest edition of the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*.

[Young adults](#) in Australia are known to be relatively resistant to anti-smoking messages, with 18% of 20- to 29-year-olds still smoking on a

daily basis.

The study, a [randomised trial](#), involved a survey of 160 smokers, aged between 18 and 30 years, with follow-up surveys at one, three, and six months. Participants were divided equally into an [intervention group](#) and a [control group](#).

All participants were surveyed about their attitudes to [personal appearance](#), opinions about smoking related health risks, and perceived barriers to [quitting smoking](#), and were offered standardised [smoking cessation](#) advice.

Intervention group participants were also screened for body dysmorphia, a body-image related [psychological disorder](#).

These participants were then photographed and their images digitally aged to show how they would look in their 50s and 60s if they smoked, compared with how they would look as a non-smoker.

The researchers found that five of the 80 participants in the intervention group had quit smoking at the six month follow-up compared with only one from the control group.

The study also showed a reduction in [nicotine dependence](#) in intervention group participants who remained smokers.

"We found that using this photoaging technology to confront smokers with how their smoking will affect their skin ageing was effective at persuading one in seven young adult smokers to quit," said Professor Moyez Jiwa, study supervisor and Chair of Health Innovation at the Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute.

"We know that people are heavily invested in images of their faces. This

study builds on previous observations that threats to [facial appearance](#) are likely to result in compliance with anything that diminishes a threat to their future appearance," he said.

"The results of this research form part of what could be an exciting and important step in identifying alternative opportunities to spread the message about the harm that smoking causes, and ultimately, encourage people to quit smoking."

Professor Ron Borland, Distinguished Fellow in Cancer Prevention at Cancer Council Victoria and Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne's School of Population Health, said the findings were important because they demonstrated the potential impact of the technique.

"If we can make the adverse consequence of smoking real to people, it acts as a significant motivator to quit," he said.

"For young people, the link between the way they look now and the way they'll look if they continue to smoke is very compelling.

"It's actually showing them something they otherwise may not have been aware of until they started gaining all those wrinkles, that is actually happening to them and is going to happen to them, gradually, until they stop."

Dr Becky Freeman, public health lecturer at the University of Sydney's School of Public Health said the study was interesting because it used appearance as a motivator instead of relying on health or financial motivators as has been done in the past.

"It's great that people are trying to look at different things that motivate people aged 18 to 30 to quit because this is a hard group to crack."

Dr Freeman highlighted the the limitations of the study, such as the small sample size and strictness of selection criteria, but said a one year follow-up would help strengthen the results.

More information: www.jmir.org/2013/3/e64/

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