

Short daily walk might help teen smokers cut down or quit, study says

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This image shows a ruby-colored ashtray filled with smoldering cigarette butts. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, smoking harms nearly every organ of the body and causes many diseases including lung cancer. Credit: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Teenagers who increased the days on which they got just 20 minutes of exercise were able to cut down on their smoking habit. And teenage smokers were more likely to quit altogether if they participated in a

smoking cessation/fitness program—and they ramped up the days on which they got at least 30 minutes of physical activity, according to a study published online April 9.

"This study adds to evidence suggesting that exercise can help teenagers who are trying to quit [smoking](#)," says lead author Kimberly Horn, EdD, the Associate Dean for Research at the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services (SPHHS). "Teens who boosted the number of days on which they engaged in at least 20 minutes of exercise, equivalent to a short walk, were more likely than their peers to resist lighting up a cigarette."

Horn and her colleagues tracked 233 teenagers from 19 high schools in West Virginia, a state with among the highest smoking rates in the nation. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), which funded this study, says that nearly 13 percent of West Virginia residents under the age of 18 are current smokers.

The participants in the study were daily smokers with other [risky behaviors](#). "It is not unusual for teenage smokers to engage in other [unhealthy habits](#)," Horn said. "Smoking and [physical inactivity](#)—for instance—often go hand in hand." The average teenager in the study smoked a half a pack on weekdays and a whopping pack a day on the weekends. A previous study of the same group compared three types of programs aimed at getting the participants to stop or cut down on smoking. That study found that an intensive smoking cessation intervention combined with a [fitness program](#) was the most successful way to help teenagers quit.

In the current study, Horn's team looked to see if an increase in physical activity would help teens quit regardless of the type of intervention. In this study, as in the previous one, some teenagers went through an intensive anti-smoking program combined with a fitness intervention

while others just got the [smoking cessation](#) program and still others listened to a short anti-smoking lecture.

Horn found that all of the teens increased their exercise activity to some degree—just by virtue of being in the study. However, teens who reported increasing the number of days in which they got just 20 minutes a day of exercise were able to significantly cut back on the cigarettes they smoked.

Horn's previous study showed that the most powerful way for teens to quit smoking was if they participated in a program called Not-On-Tobacco; it was even more powerful for boys with an added fitness component. The researchers believe that the 20-minute threshold for changing smoking behavior deserves further study.

Certainly, the study has limitations, says Horn. "We don't fully understand the clinical relevance of ramping up daily activity to 20 or 30 minutes a day with these teens. But we do know that even modest improvements in exercise may have health benefits. Our study supports the idea that encouraging one healthy behavior can serve to promote another, and it shows that teens, often viewed as resistant to behavior change, can tackle two health behaviors at once."

Additional research must confirm the key findings and prove that they apply to all teen smokers and not just those in West Virginia, Horn says. And researchers still do not know the mechanism that might explain the findings. However, she says that [physical activity](#) is known to spur the release of the body's feel-good chemicals called endorphins. One possible explanation is that those substances might help [teen smokers](#) better deal with the cravings or weather the withdrawal symptoms that often lead to relapse, she said.

More information: The study, "Understanding Physical Activity as a

Function of Teen Smoking," appears online April 9 in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Provided by George Washington University

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