

# Tobacco's harms may come sooner than smokers think

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(HealthDay)—Smokers often think their habit won't have health

consequences until far into the future, a small survey suggests.

Researchers found that compared with nonsmokers, those who smoke generally believe that any health problems—from yellow teeth to lung cancer—would strike later in life.

It's a perception, researchers said, that might delay some people's efforts to quit.

Smoking rates in the United States have fallen substantially over the years, noted Dr. Norman Edelman, senior scientific advisor for the American Lung Association.

That's due to efforts like cigarette taxes and, in particular, public education about the many health hazards of tobacco use, said Edelman, who was not involved in the study.

Even so, many people continue to light up.

As of 2016, nearly 38 million Americans said they smoked on at least "some days," according to a report released last week by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's no secret, Edelman said, that "[smokers](#) tend to minimize the health risks."

And the new findings, recently published online in the *Journal of Cognitive Psychology*, underscore that view.

"This isn't surprising," Edelman said. "But it is important information."

He said it might be wise for education efforts to emphasize the short-term consequences of [smoking](#)—describing not only what they are, but

how quickly they can show up.

As examples, he pointed to chronic cough and "reduced exercise tolerance"—a decline in physical fitness that can strike otherwise healthy young people who smoke.

"If I tell you your exercise tolerance is going to drop, that might have a greater impact on a young person," Edelman said.

The findings come from a survey of 172 Italian adults, aged 18 to 35—60 of whom were current smokers.

The participants were asked to consider how long it would take for an 18-year-old who smoked 10 cigarettes a day to develop various health conditions.

Nonsmokers typically thought milder problems—like sore throat, breathlessness and gum disease—would crop up in one to five years.

Smokers had a more upbeat view—predicting it would be five to 10 years before those conditions arose, the findings showed.

The pattern was similar when researchers asked about serious diseases—including lung cancer, emphysema and heart disease—that develop in the longer term.

Nonsmokers predicted those serious diseases would happen after 20 to 25 years of tobacco use; smokers thought they would take 30 years or more to develop, according to the report.

The study authors noted that the point isn't whose estimates are right or wrong.

"The relevant finding is that smokers believe that smoking leaves you unaffected by these illnesses longer than [nonsmokers](#) do," said study co-author Luca Pancani, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Milano-Bicocca, in Italy.

The timing of any smoking-related problems would vary person to person—and depend on many factors, including genes, Pancani said.

He added that other research has shown that people rarely think about their future health when they start smoking.

"Our findings suggest that even when young adults are asked to think of possible negative consequences of smoking, they tend to see them as something that could occur only later in the future," Pancani said.

It might partly reflect a phenomenon called "cognitive dissonance," he said. When people act in a way that contradicts their beliefs, it makes them uncomfortable. So they try to change their beliefs—deciding, for example, that the ill effects of smoking won't happen for many years.

Smokers may also know people who lit up for years and never had [health](#) problems, Pancani said, and they might take those examples as "reassurance."

Edelman agreed. "People are great at denial," he said.

But the bottom line, Edelman added, is that "regular smokers are hurting their bodies right now. It's not something that happens only in the distant future."

**More information:** Luca Pancani, Ph.D., postdoctoral fellow, department of psychology, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy; Norman Edelman, M.D., senior scientific advisor, American Lung Association;

Dec. 13, 2017, *Journal of Cognitive Psychology*, online

The American Lung Association has resources for [quitting smoking](#).

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