

Smoking Cessation During a Pandemic

A look at the medical and financial costs
of smoking for people and organizations



Overview

It's not news that cigarette smoking has massive societal repercussions. Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the U.S., and it's estimated to cost the nation more than \$300 billion per year.¹ What is new is how the COVID-19 pandemic has raised the stakes for people who smoke—and for the companies that employ them.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, smokers may be at increased risk of infection with the coronavirus and, if infected, could experience worse health outcomes.² In addition, with more employees now working from home, factors like increased stress and loneliness can make it harder to quit smoking or stay smoke-free. In fact, a recent study showed that workers who experience work-family conflict have a higher likelihood of smoking than those who don't.³

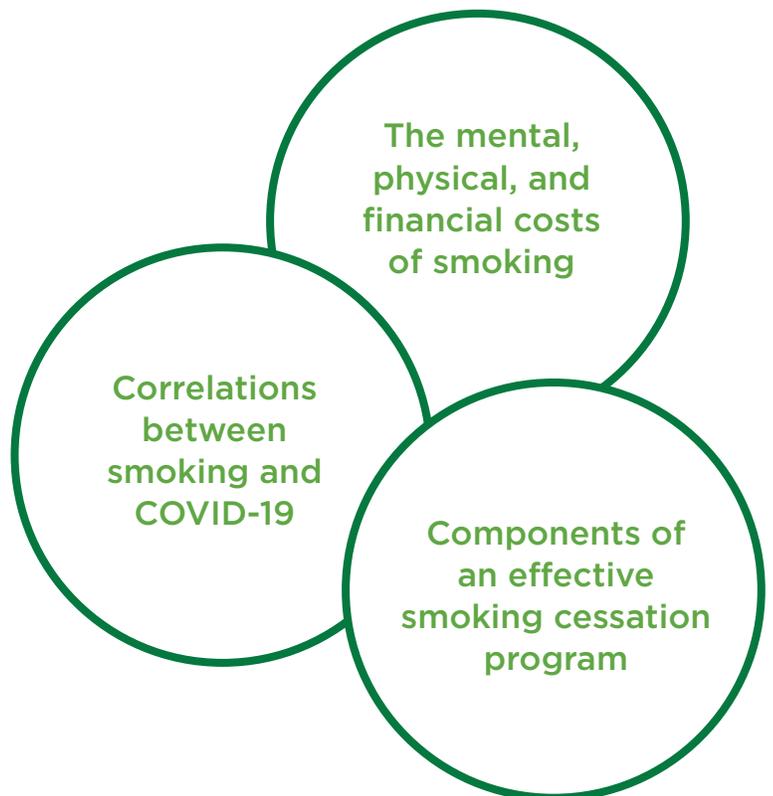
Companies that strive to create a culture of wellbeing must offer a smoking cessation program that provides comprehensive, personalized support for employees wherever they are today. Combining professional counseling with FDA-approved medications can double the chances of quitting successfully,⁴ while telehealth services provide the flexibility employees need right now.

Here at Wellness Coaches we've seen firsthand that science-backed methods offer the greatest likelihood of success. Our cessation program, QuitNet, has helped more than 1.3 million clients stop using tobacco products with tried-and-true techniques backed by scientific research and field testing.

To help you understand the current challenges with smoking cessation and choose the right program for your organization, this paper covers insights and advice from many of the world's leading health organizations and scientific journals.

What You'll Learn

In this paper, we'll look at the medical and financial costs of smoking for people and organizations, including direct and indirect costs related to healthcare and productivity. We'll discuss elevated risks associated with smoking and COVID-19, as well as how our new ways of work can affect smoking habits. Finally, we'll provide information about the tools and approaches that are crucial to a successful smoking cessation program for your employees, especially in the context of the pandemic.



The Mental, Physical, and Financial Costs of Smoking

Smoking places a substantial burden on smokers, their employers, and society, owing to its far-reaching impacts on our mental, physical, and financial wellbeing. Both employees and employers must absorb the costs of diminished overall health, increased absenteeism and reduced productivity, and higher healthcare utilization and costs.

Mental & Physical Toll

Today, many people are aware that smoking has negative health effects. It harms nearly every organ in the body and increases the risk of developing a life-threatening disease.¹ But there are also a number of lesser-known effects that can seriously impair health and quality of life:⁵

- Diminished bone health in women
- Weakened teeth and gums and tooth loss
- Increased risk of cataracts and age-related macular degeneration
- Decreased immune function
- Reduced fertility and increased risks of miscarriage and birth defects
- Higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes mellitus

Smoking takes a toll on mental health as well, particularly for people with mild to severe behavioral health conditions. Roughly 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. has some form of behavioral health condition, such as depression, anxiety, or a substance use disorder. Yet these individuals account for almost 40% of all cigarettes smoked in the U.S.⁶ They also smoke more cigarettes per month and are less likely to stop smoking than those without such conditions.⁷

Many smokers want to quit but continue smoking because they believe it has mental health benefits, such as relieving stress or regulating mood. And, as the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened stress and anxiety for many people, smokers may perceive this as a bad time to quit—but just the opposite is true.

Smoking cessation is associated with reduced depression, anxiety, and stress, a more positive mood, and improved quality of life, compared with continuing to smoke. In fact, the positive effects of smoking cessation are estimated to be equal to or greater than the effects of antidepressant treatment for mood disorders.⁸

However, while people with mental health disorders may want to quit smoking, they often face additional emotional, physical, and financial challenges and thus may need extra help and support—particularly in the face of the pandemic.

Financial Impact

Smoking exacts a large economic burden on society, both in direct and indirect financial costs. Direct costs are those expenses associated with health services, including payments made by a company for healthcare benefits, disability, and workers' compensation. Indirect costs are not immediately related to healthcare and may include lost wages, lost workdays, the cost of replacement workers, overtime expenditures, and productivity losses.⁹

Smoking is estimated to cost the U.S. more than \$300 billion per year, including nearly \$176 billion in direct medical care for adults and roughly \$157 billion in lost productivity due to premature death and exposure to secondhand smoke.¹

Between extra health care costs and lost productivity, people who smoke cost their employers an average of nearly \$6,000 per person per year extra versus nonsmokers.¹⁰

Productivity loss is the largest single cost that organizations incur from employees who smoke.¹⁰ Productivity loss is attributed to both absenteeism and “presenteeism,” which occurs when a worker’s performance is hindered by illness or a medical condition. Presenteeism costs can make up more than 75 percent of total productivity losses compared with those due to absenteeism.¹¹

An additional cost for both individuals and employers is higher health insurance premiums. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act allows insurance companies to charge smokers up to 50 percent more than non-smokers through a tobacco surcharge. While the surcharges vary from state to state, most states charge the maximum 50 percent.¹²

Correlations Between Smoking and COVID-19

When it comes to COVID-19, smokers are doubly at risk: compared with non-smokers, they may be more likely to contract the coronavirus, and they are more likely to develop serious complications. In addition, the new ways of living and working necessitated by the pandemic have created conditions that may make people smoke more—and make it harder to quit.

Risk of Infection

While there’s limited evidence showing that smoking increases the risk of contracting COVID-19, smoking is known to be one of the main risk factors for respiratory tract infections. Cigarette smoke has been shown to significantly damage the immune system, and toxins in both cigarettes and e-cigarettes cause mucus buildup in the lungs, making smokers more susceptible to viral and bacterial infections.¹⁵

One hypothesis proposed by the World Health Organization is that smokers may be more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 because they touch their lips with their fingers, increasing the possibility of transmitting viruses from hand to mouth.¹⁶ Recent research also suggests that an enzyme that’s prevalent in people with chronic inflammatory illnesses and those who smoke may serve as a gateway to the SARS-CoV-2 virus.¹⁷

Finally, smoking can have a massive impact on an individual’s finances in multiple ways: out-of-pocket costs for cigarettes, financial opportunity costs, medical costs, income loss, and higher homeowner’s insurance (nonsmokers usually receive a credit of 5 to 15 percent). WalletHub estimates that the total yearly cost per smoker ranges from an average of roughly \$24,000 to \$48,000, depending on the state where they live.¹³ Then there are the costs for victims of secondhand smoke exposure, which is associated with excess hospital nights and emergency room visits and can total upwards of \$1 billion.¹⁴

E-cigarettes are not necessarily a safer alternative. A study of young adults aged 13-24 showed that those who have ever used e-cigarettes were 5 times more likely to contract COVID-19 than people who do not use tobacco products. Dual users of cigarettes and e-cigarettes were nearly 7 times more likely to contract the virus.¹⁸

Severity of Disease

Organizations from WHO to the U.S. FDA have warned that smokers are more likely to have negative outcomes from COVID-19. Studies suggest that smokers are at higher risk of developing severe outcomes and death primarily because smoking

impairs lung function and immune response, making it harder for the body to fight off coronaviruses and other respiratory diseases.^{15,16}

A study from the University of California San Francisco indicated that smokers with COVID-19 had nearly twice the odds of progressing to severe or critical condition or death, compared with people who have never smoked. In an analysis of nearly 12,000 COVID-19 patients, nearly 30 percent of patients with a history of smoking progressed to serious outcomes versus 17.6 percent of non-smoking patients.¹⁹

Increase in Smoking

Americans are said to be smoking more during the pandemic because they're spending less money on travel and entertainment and spending more time at home, which means more time away from places that ban smoking, such as offices, bars, and restaurants.^{20,21}

In addition to changing the way we live and work, the pandemic has an emotional impact that can affect smoking habits. A survey by *The Guardian* last spring found that millions of people in the UK were smoking more than usual during the pandemic, citing the freedom of working from home, needing excuses to get out of the house, and heightened anxiety and stress.²²

Notably, perceived stress (also known as psychosocial stress) is a significant risk factor for cigarette

smoking. Such stress can exacerbate nicotine withdrawal symptoms like anxiety and irritability; these higher stress levels then increase the urge to smoke.²³

In a Kaiser Family Foundation poll last July, 53 percent of Americans reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the coronavirus—up from 32 percent in March.²⁴ Factor in the stress of working from home—with makeshift offices, schedule adjustments, family issues, and more—and it's hard enough for smokers to deal with day-to-day living, never mind trying to keep track of how much they're smoking.

The bottom line: As people continue to face increased stress, anxiety, isolation and other effects of our new work environment, they're likely to smoke more, even if they want to quit. The pandemic has made it harder than ever to give up smoking while increasing smokers' risk of serious disease. However, as smoking cessation programs evolve with the times, there are new ways for employers to provide the help workers need, whenever and wherever they need it.

Components of a Successful Smoking Cessation Program

Nearly half of adult smokers try to quit in any given year, but fewer than 10 percent are successful.²⁵ What does it take to quit for good? The most effective strategy is to combine FDA-approved smoking cessation products with counseling from healthcare professionals who are trained to treat tobacco dependence.²⁶ Today's digital tools can also enhance cessation efforts by safely providing smokers with the personalized support they need, when and where they need it.

Employer support for a tobacco-free work culture also plays a vital role. Smoke-free workplaces not only protect non-smokers from passive smoking, but also encourage smokers to quit or cut back, reducing total cigarette consumption per employee by nearly 30 percent.²⁷ The key is to make many types of effective assistance and encouragement accessible to diverse groups of employees, while fostering a smoke-free environment.

Quit-Smoking Aids & Counseling

Only about 5 percent of people who try to quit tobacco succeed without a quit-smoking product or medication. Many more quit successfully when using a pharmacological product.²⁶ And, while counseling and cessation medication are effective for treating tobacco dependence by themselves, using them together can more than double the chances of quitting.¹

Most widely used smoking cessation programs include problem-solving and behavioral training, helping smokers to recognize harmful situations and develop the skills to cope without leaning on cigarettes.²⁸ A professional counselor can provide training in techniques like behavioral relaxation, or teach people to think about stressful situations in a less negative way.

The Lung Health Study found a strong correlation between the intensity of cessation counseling and the likelihood of success, with intensive programs involving at least four 10-minute counseling sessions. However, even interventions of less than 3 minutes had a positive effect. The study also concluded that establishing social support within the program, and helping to secure social support beyond the program, were especially effective.²⁹

Community Support

Now more than ever, people need community to overcome stress and reinforce healthy behaviors. When it comes to smoking, social support can not

only help someone quit, but also help keep them from relapsing (a process called “maintenance”). Without a maintenance component, cessation programs are less effective at helping smokers quit long-term.

To that end, current guidelines recommend that smoking cessation programs incorporate some type of community support, such as social networks or mobile communication-based systems, where people can share concerns and offer emotional support, useful advice, personal stories, and reinforcement while trying to quit.²⁸ Internet-based intervention tools have been shown to increase smoking cessation, especially when they incorporate behavior change techniques and interactive components.¹

A study of QuitNet, a large-scale social network for smoking cessation, identified the core characteristics that make a social network effective in helping smokers quit. Those characteristics include having diverse members at different stages of cessation, members who persist over time, and rich, two-way communications. Successful quitters are also a crucial piece of the network, as they provide valuable information and have a normative influence.³⁰

Essentially, the more people participate in—and stay involved in—a social support group, the better the chances for its members to quit smoking for good.

Telehealth

Another way that digital technology can make smoking cessation programs more successful, particularly in the midst of the pandemic, is through telehealth counseling. Studies show that integrating internet and telephone treatment programs may encourage greater use of, and adherence to, cessation information and support. It also allows a counselor to provide direct social support by tailoring an intervention to an individual smoker’s needs.³¹

In addition, telehealth counseling can help ensure that smokers complete a cessation program rather than dropping out, when completion may be crucial for success in quitting. A study in Japan showed that telemedicine not only reduced dropout rates by providing convenient access to a program, but was just as effective a form of counseling as face-to-face sessions.³²

- Finally, telehealth counseling provides key benefits during the pandemic:
- Limits physical contact to reduce the infection risk for counselors and clients
- Enables ongoing counseling for those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19
- Allows for more frequent, shorter visits to provide greater support and accountability

Conclusion

Creating a tobacco-free workplace has never been more essential for organizational health and wellbeing, especially for companies that strive for a culture of wellness. While the pandemic can induce stress and anxiety, making it harder for smokers to quit, it also offers a unique opportunity to talk about the importance of quitting now. In addition, emerging technologies such as digital networks and telehealth counseling can enhance the timing and personalization—and thus the effectiveness—of cessation intervention.

Moreover, smoking cessation results in substantial cost savings for both employers and employees by improving work productivity and decreasing direct and indirect costs. In fact, the economic benefits of smoking cessation programs have been shown to be far greater than the costs involved on a long-term basis.³³

For organizations that strive to maintain a healthy and productive work culture today, an effective smoking cessation program is essential. We encourage you to contact your corporate wellness provider to learn more about how you can support a smoke-free environment and extend it to wherever your employees are today.

About Wellness Coaches

Since 2002, Wellness Coaches has delivered proven results and high ROI through personalized support and company-wide health and wellness programs. As one of the largest and most experienced wellness, nutrition, and injury prevention coaching providers in the workplace, our expertise has allowed us to pivot quickly to offer the same high-quality programs virtually, along with new solutions specifically for COVID-19.

For more information on a Smoking Cessation Program for your employees, please contact:

Gene McGuire at 866-894-1300 x12 or gmcguire@wcusa.com.

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