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Smoking “Light” is not like eating “light”

Many smokers think that if they switch to “light” cigarettes, they will reduce their chance of cancer or other health related issues. They might believe that because in the area of weight management, we are told to eat light meals, to eat “reduced fat,” or to drink “light” or “low-carb” beer. Unfortunately, that thinking does not translate to smoking cigarettes. The truth is, modern cigarettes, including “light” cigarettes, actually may increase the risk of cancer, particularly a certain type of cancer.

Lauran Neergaard, AP Medical Writer, recently reported that a preliminary though rather in-depth study of smokers in the U.S. and Australia found a dramatic increase of a particular type of cancer in U.S. smokers. The difference between the U.S. smokers and Australian smokers was significant because it could be directly linked to the difference between cigarettes made and sold in the U.S. versus those made and sold in Australia.

The cancer most generally associated with smoking has been squamous cell carcinoma, however, the study showed an alarming increase in cases of adenocarcinoma. Up to 70% of newly reported U.S. cancer cases are of adenocarcinoma, but in Australia, that rate has stayed fairly constant at 40%. Even more alarming, the study suggests, is that a smoker’s risk of cancer, per se, has increased over the years as cigarettes have changed.

Nitrosamine, a byproduct of tobacco processing, is the primary chemical culprit of the increase in adenocarcinoma. Nitrosamine levels in cigarettes in Australia are 20% of those in cigarettes in the US (i.e., U.S. cigarettes have nitrosamine levels 5 times higher).

The reason “light” cigarettes have been linked to the increase in cancer rates, particularly adenocarcinoma, is that smokers tend to inhale more deeply, pushing the toxic chemicals (including nitrosamines) more deeply into the lungs. Adenocarcinoma is cancer of the smaller air sacs found quite deep in the lungs. Squamous cell carcinoma is cancer of the larger air tubes, higher in the lungs. So, the correlation between cigarettes produced in the U.S., including “light” cigarettes, with the dramatic increase of adenocarcinoma in U.S. smokers seems quite clear.

Even though this study is quite compelling, it doesn’t take a new study to convince anyone that smoking is bad for one’s health. So why do smokers continue to smoke? They don’t really know how to quit, they have certain fears about quitting, or they simply don’t want to quit. I encourage every smoker reading this article to ask yourself what it is about smoking that provides such pleasure to be worth the health risk, the expense - not only of the cigarettes but insurance, dry cleaning, etc., and the lack of freedom. When you begin to realize that you might have much to gain by quitting, ask someone for help and support. There are many people willing and able to help you. How cool is that!

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