

## Smoking and Children

In a recent hit song, popular female vocalist Whitney Houston reminds us that "children are our future." Nowhere is this statement more true than in the case of smoking and health. Today's prevalence of smoking among children and adolescents determines tomorrow's prevalence of smoking among adults. The overwhelming majority of smokers begin to smoke before age 20 (1).

During the past 25 years we have made great strides in reducing the prevalence of smoking among adults in the United States. By 1986 the overall smoking rate for adults 17 years of age and older had reached an all-time low of 26.5 percent (2).

We also have achieved substantial progress in reducing smoking among teenagers. According to national survey data collected annually by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the smoking rate among high school seniors fell from a peak of 29 percent in 1976 to 21 percent in 1980. Unfortunately, this rate has leveled off from 1980 through 1986 at 19 to 21 percent. An additional source of concern is that females in this group consistently have a higher smoking rate than males (3).

To ensure continued progress in the area of smoking and health, we must redouble our efforts to discourage smoking among children and adolescents.

The best opportunity to teach our youth about the adverse consequences of smoking (including health and cosmetic effects) is in school. Such instruction should be provided to every student in the country as a required component of a comprehensive school health education curriculum. Studies show that school education on smoking and health can be effective in reducing initiation of smoking among teenagers (4).

Strong forces encourage smoking by adolescents, such as peer pressure, smoking by parents, and advertising themes that glamorize smoking. To counter these forces, the public health community should adopt a multi-faceted set of strategies.

This Department, the Secretary, Dr. Otis R. Bowen, and I urge that all jurisdictions establish at least age 18 as the minimum age for the purchase of cigarettes and other tobacco products. Enactment and enforcement of such legislation could have a strong preventive effect on early uptake of cigarettes and other tobacco products.

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## References . . . . .

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