

Youth smoking decline slowing

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rettes has been decelerating over the past several years; and in 2005 the decline halted among eighth graders, who have been the bellwethers of smoking among teens."

The percentage of teen smokers reported by MTF in January 2005 was 25 percent of 12th graders, 16 percent of 10th graders and 9 percent of 8th graders. In comparison, the current rates are 23 percent of 12th graders (two percentage points lower), 15 percent of 10th graders (one percentage point lower), and 9 percent of 8th graders (the same as last year).

The MTF study, paid for by grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, was conducted by an annual survey of representative samples of approximately 50,000 students around the nation in grades eight, 10th, 11th and 12th, in 400 secondary schools. The survey asks the students if they have smoked within the past 30 days.

Rather fight than quit

Over the past decade, the rates had, for the most part, steadily declined, sometimes leaping as much as four percentage points from one year to the next. But, the gradual slowing of the decline has given anti-tobacco advocates cause for major concern.

"In the 30 years that this study now spans, we have seen some wide fluctuations in the smoking habits of American young people," states Lloyd Johnson, the study's lead researcher. "We are still seeing some residual declines in smoking in the upper grades, as the lower-smoking birth cohorts make their way up the age spectrum... But, even in the upper grades a slowdown is occurring, and we believe the declines are likely to end very soon."

The overall high school smoking rate for black students is 14 percent, compared to 26 percent for whites. The CDC reports that the 14 percent for African-Americans is a major reduction from 22 percent six years ago. That's one reason the slowing of the trend is so disappointing to health and anti-tobacco advocates.

The study states that the slowing decline is in large

part because of the failure of states to use money provided by the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between attorneys general from 46 states, five U.S. territories and the tobacco industry that's supposed to address youth smoking and help smokers who want to quit.

"Only a handful of states have used this money for its intended purpose," says Cheryl Heaton, president and chief executive of the American Legacy Foundation, the nation's only foundation solely focused on tobacco prevention and cessation.

Heaton also says a clause in the agreement allowed the tobacco industry to stop payments into a National Public Education Fund in 2003, effectively cutting funding for Legacy's "Truth" campaign, the only national youth tobacco-prevention initiative not directed or controlled by the tobacco industry.

The 5-year-old Truth campaign is the largest national youth-smoking-prevention campaign and the only national campaign not directed by the tobacco industry. It exposes inside information about the tobacco industry, facts about addiction, health effects and social consequences of smoking in order to help teens make informed choices about tobacco use.

"At a time when only four states - Colorado, Delaware, Maine and Mississippi - have allocated tobacco prevention and cessation budgets at recommended CDC levels, the industry spent \$15.4 billion in 2003, according to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission," Heaton says in a statement in response to the MTF study. "That means that for every dollar the United States spends on tobacco prevention, the tobacco industry is paying \$28 [million a day] to market its deadly products - a fact that paints a bleak picture for the health of our nation."

Legacy, National African-American Tobacco Prevention Network the National Latino Council on Alcohol and Tobacco Prevention, and other anti-tobacco advocates have engaged in heated battles against youth smoking, including a campaign against flavored cigarettes, which

they see particularly targeted black teens to get them hooked. Eighty percent of smokers start before the age of 18, according to the CDC.

Meanwhile, the tobacco industry continues to do damage, Heaton states.

"Tobacco use kills 1200 Americans every day and 450,000 every year. More people die from tobacco-related diseases than from AIDS, alcohol use, drugs, fires, car accidents, murders and suicides combined," says Heaton. "It is the nation's leading preventable cause of death."

In 2004, the American Legacy Foundation awarded a \$4.5 million, three-year grant to a coalition of six national African-American organizations - the National Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation, the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, the National Conference of Black Mayors and the National Association of Neighborhoods - to help curb tobacco use among African-Americans.

How to butt out

In response to the study, Legacy issued a statement making three recommendations that the public health community and the community in general can take to continue reducing youth smoking:

- Encourage the states' commitment to spending tobacco settlement dollars to youth smoking-prevention campaigns and to educate people on how to quit.

- Find a way to restore the National Public Education Fund. A shift in tobacco sales market share allowed the tobacco industry to stop payments to this fund established in the Master Settlement Agreement. As a result, limited funding is now available for the Truth program, credited for 22 percent of the overall decline in youth smoking between 2000 and 2002, when the campaign was fully funded.

- Continue to document the impact of smoking in the movies on American youth. A new study released just last month in the journal, Pediatrics, showed that more than one-third of American

adolescents between 10 and 14 years of age started smoking as a direct result of exposure to smoking in films. Legacy recommends that keeping smoking out of movies rated G, PG, and PG-13 movies could prevent smoking among youth.

But despite the well-publicized statistics on tobacco deaths, Adams - a smoker since his mid-teens - appears to be a participant in the new and dangerous trend of holding on to the habit.

"I don't know," he answers nonchalantly about the possibility of quitting. "I've thought about it."

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