

Substances At A Glance: Tobacco & Cigarettes

This fact sheet was developed in consultation with Ellisa Johnson, Cultural Coordinator of Hiawatha First Nation, Ontario. To learn about cultural perspectives regarding tobacco and substances in your community, contact a local Indigenous service provider.



What is tobacco? Tobacco is a plant whose documented use in history has included medicinal and spiritual purposes. Today, it's most commonly sold as smoking products (cigarettes or cigars), chewing products, sniffed ("dry snuff") or held inside the cheek ("wet snuff"). Natural tobacco grows wild and remains green when dried, while commercial tobacco tends to be darker colors due to processing. Tobacco use is legal in Canada but is connected with dozens of life-threatening health risks. Tobacco also contains nicotine, which is a highly addictive stimulant.¹



Tobacco use among youth: Canadian youth report trying tobacco for the first time at age 13, younger than any other recreational drug. Overall, 16% of high school age youth report having tried tobacco products, while 4.5% report past 30-day tobacco use.² Meanwhile, 22% of post-secondary age youth report having tried cigarettes and 10% report past 30-day use.³



Why do youth use tobacco? Youth report trying cigarettes recreationally due to curiosity or a desire to fit in with peers. The reasons they continue to use, however, are different. These include relieving boredom, managing stress, maintaining weight or focus, while others continue to use due to feeling strong cravings to smoke caused by the addictive qualities of nicotine.⁴



Nicotine addiction: Within seconds of consuming nicotine, the brain releases dopamine, a chemical which causes feelings of pleasure, focus, satisfaction and motivation. When someone stops using nicotine, they may feel irritable, restless, anxious, tired and unfocused; these symptoms are known as withdrawal. These feelings are often relieved through using more nicotine, which creates a cycle of dependency. The strong reaction by the brain makes nicotine one of the most addictive known products.⁵



Commercial vs Ceremonial Tobacco: Commercial tobacco is not viewed the same way as ceremonial tobacco. For example in Anishnaabe teaching, it is referred to as semaa, the first gift given from the Creator. It is placed in a sacred fire, in water or on the land daily for prayer. It is only smoked in a Sacred pipe for ceremonial purposes. Semaa can be offered to an Elder, Knowledge Sharer or Medicine Person when asking for their help; when accepted, this symbolizes their commitment to provide aid.⁶



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Up to half of those who smoke regularly will die from tobacco-related illnesses.⁴ Worldwide, tobacco is responsible for 8 million deaths per year, including 1.2 million caused by second-hand smoke.⁷



Short and long term effects of tobacco: Nicotine in tobacco causes feelings of pleasure and stimulation. It also stains fingers, lips, teeth and other surfaces. Tobacco use can increase heart rate, cause dizziness, headaches, nausea, coughing or gagging as well as aggravate symptoms of allergies or asthma. The smell of tobacco smoke can also linger on clothing. Tobacco can weaken the senses of taste and smell, as well as reduce feelings of hunger.⁵



What are the risks of tobacco? Tobacco contains around 80 different cancer-causing toxins including benzene, tar, hydrogen cyanide, heavy metals and formaldehyde.⁸ Regular tobacco use is associated with over 40 debilitating diseases, including 16 different types of cancer of the mouth, lung, throat and other organs.⁴ Over 90% of lung cancers in men and 70% in women are directly caused by cigarette smoke.⁹ People who smoke tobacco die around 10 years sooner than those who have never smoked.⁴



How can someone reduce the risks of smoking? There is no safe level of tobacco smoke that a person can inhale. Those who choose to smoke should do so outdoors, away from non-smokers to reduce risks of second hand smoke. Speak with a healthcare provider to consider alternative coping strategies if you are smoking to relieve stress. Quitting smoking can be extremely difficult due to the addictive nature of nicotine, so anyone doing so should seek support or resources from their doctor.



How can I talk with my kids about tobacco? Conversations about smoking are crucial to have with your pre-teen or teen; the earlier the better. Ask them about their feelings on smoking, explain the health risks while respecting their feelings and opinions to avoid sounding judgmental. Most of all, if your child is experiencing issues with stress or struggling with their well-being, remind them you are there to provide support in any way they need you.



Vaping & E-Cigarettes: In the last 20 years, vaping and e-cigarette products have become more commonly used methods of consuming nicotine by youth. **Visit our website** for more information about vaping, including a similar fact sheet to this one!

Reference List

1. Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), 2010. [Tobacco](#).
2. Government of Canada, 2025. [Canadian Student Alcohol And Drugs Survey, 2023-2024](#).
3. Government of Canada, 2025. [Canadian Post-Secondary Education Alcohol & Drug Use Survey, 2024-2025](#).
4. Canadian Cancer Society, retrieved February 2024. [Cigarettes: the hard truth](#).
5. CAMH, retrieved February 2024. [Nicotine dependence](#).
6. Oral history provided by Ellisa Johnson, Cultural Coordinator, Hiawatha. Consulted February 2024.
7. World Health Organization, 2023. [Tobacco](#).
8. Health Canada, 2023. [Toxins in Tobacco Smoke](#).
9. Canadian Lung Association, retrieved February 2024. [Causes](#).