



A Reflection on Teenagers' Smoking in Iran

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Dear Editor-in-Chief,

Smoking is a serious threat to health, and a large majority of smokers start during their teenage years (ages 10-19). Simply knowing about the dangers of smoking isn't enough to stop teenagers from starting. They need to develop the attitudes and skills to resist pressure and the urge to smoke. To effectively prevent teenagers from using cigarettes and other tobacco products, we need to find the right educational tools, understand what makes them accept the information, ensure the education is effective and remembered, and make sure it fits with their culture.

Key Words: Iran, Smoking, Teenagers, Reflection.

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Introduction

Smoking among youth and adolescents is a global concern. Cigarette smoking remains a leading preventable cause of premature death and disability worldwide (1). Given that most smokers initiate smoking before age 18, preventing teenage smoking is a crucial strategy for reducing overall prevalence (2). While awareness of the long-term health consequences is important, it's often insufficient to deter teenagers from starting to smoke. Influenced by tobacco industry advertising, teenagers may perceive smoking and other tobacco products as attractive, liberating, sophisticated, and indicative of intelligence or sexual appeal (3-5). Peer pressure also plays a significant role in the initiation and continuation of smoking among teenagers (6). Therefore, educational programs aimed at promoting smoke-free lives among teenagers should counteract these positive perceptions by engaging peer leaders to promote smoke-free norms and equipping teenagers with the skills to resist peer pressure (7).

Tobacco initiation is influenced by individual, cultural, social, and environmental factors. Young people typically progress through stages, from recreational experimentation in adolescence to regular consumption and potential addiction in adulthood (7-10). These factors' impact varies by gender and across stages:

- **Personality Factors:** Personality traits such as academic struggles, rebelliousness, low self-esteem, social disconnection and isolation, difficulty coping with peer pressure, limited knowledge, and misperceptions regarding the health risks of smoking can contribute to tobacco use.
- **Social and Cultural Factors:** Family dynamics, particularly strained parent-child relationships, strongly influence smoking initiation. These factors may

have differential effects based on gender; for instance, parental smoking may have a greater impact on daughters, while sibling smoking may be more influential for sons. Social pressures, including peer smoking and positive reinforcement from peers for smoking, are also significant contributors to teenage smoking.

- **Environmental Factors:** Socioeconomic disadvantage (poverty) and easy access to cigarettes (through sales to minors and low prices) are strongly associated with continued smoking, although less so with initial experimentation. Cigarette advertising in the media can stimulate progression from initial experimentation to regular consumption. Furthermore, widespread cigarette availability in public spaces, such as shops and newspaper stands, and the provision of matches contribute to environmental factors that promote cigarette use among teenagers in Iran (3, 4, 11).

The Role of Schools in Reducing Smoking

Schools are uniquely positioned to prevent tobacco use among students due to their environment and accessibility. Given that students spend a significant portion of their time at school and that smoking often begins with peer influence, particularly before the end of high school, schools can positively influence anti-smoking attitudes and behaviors. When students feel a sense of connection to their school community, they are less likely to engage in destructive behaviors, including smoking. Comprehensive tobacco bans for students, staff, and visitors on school grounds have also proven effective in lowering smoking rates among teenagers (3, 12-15).

The Role of Parents in Preventing Smoking

Families exert a significant influence on students' attitudes toward smoking, and

their active participation in prevention programs is crucial. Educational programs that incorporate interactive activities for parents and other family members promote broader discussions about tobacco use, leading to the adoption of stricter tobacco policies at home and potentially encouraging adult smokers to quit (4, 3, 16). Studies suggest that encouragement and persuasion account for 68% of successful smoking cessation among students, while education and policy contribute 16% each (17).

Conclusion

Rising rates of teenage smoking are a significant global health concern. Adolescence is a unique and vulnerable period marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, requiring proactive and informed family involvement. When teenagers feel comfortable discussing their challenges openly at home, without fear of judgment or punishment, and receive logical guidance from parents, the influence of peers may be diminished.

Furthermore, schools play a critical role in fostering healthy role models – students engaged in academics, sports, and smoke-free lifestyles – and reinforcing anti-smoking attitudes and behaviors. At the community level, comprehensive measures are needed, including restricting tobacco advertising and supply to teenagers, increasing the price of tobacco products, preventing illegal sales, and imposing stricter penalties on offenders.

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