

Talking to kids about smoking

NASSAWADOX – A recent study delivered some discouraging news in the fight against smoking.

Two years ago, for the first time, girls were trying cigarettes at higher rates than boys, according to The National Survey on Drug Use and Health, released by the White House earlier this month. The study found that 730,000 girls ages 12 to 17 started smoking – compared with 565,000 boys – in 2004, the latest year for which statistics were available.

Parents shouldn't despair, according to Chris Manetz, director of Cardiopulmonary Services, a division of Shore Memorial Hospital that offers programs and in-depth support to help people quit smoking. Mom and dad have a greater impact than anyone – even on teens.

One factor is the example parents set. "Children of people who smoke are far more likely to become smokers themselves," Manetz said. "It's demonstrated behavior. If mom and dad do it, it must be OK."

It's also useful to know that teenagers aren't buying 80 percent of the cigarettes they smoke. "They get them from somebody, an uncle or a friend," Manetz said – or from mom's purse. Parents can limit access by abstaining themselves.

But it's even more important to motivate kids not to smoke – and to help them find ways to turn down cigarettes gracefully. That's where discussion comes in. Start broaching the subject with kids as early as 6 or 7, Manetz said. "Children that age can grasp the concept of healthy versus unhealthy behavior."

By age 8, kids are capable of deciding to never begin smoking.

It's a decision that will affect the rest of their lives. Smoking is a top risk factor for heart and lung disease and diabetes. The chemicals in cigarette smoke are as addictive as heroin – which is why it's so tough to kick the habit.

In talking to kids about smoking, make sure to keep the conversation simple and straightforward. "It doesn't have to be a philosophical message," Manetz said.

Focus on concrete risk factors and detractions that will mean something – especially to teens. Smoking stains their fingers, yellows their teeth and in general smells bad. Members of

the opposite sex may find it unattractive, particularly because it causes bad breath. It can burn holes in the upholstery of their car or ruin the jeans they saved so long to buy.

Tell budding athletes that smoking impairs their performance. “A lot of teenagers believe through and through that it is not impacting their health today,” Manetz said. “That’s not true. Even one week of smoking has been shown to cause wheezing in teenagers. It doesn’t take 20 years. It has an immediate impact.”

And the habit can also be expensive. According to a report by the U.S. Surgeon General, the average smoker spends about \$700 a year on cigarettes. Parents could help teens think about what they could do instead with the money. They could play 2,800 arcade video games, for example.

It’s also crucial to role-play with kids to help them determine a strategy to turn down cigarettes without looking preachy or uncool. “The biggest thing is peer pressure,” Manetz said. “On a dozen different occasions every year they’re going to be offered a cigarette.”

Manetz advises deflecting those offers without overtly refusing by saying something like, “No, I’m good.” In a perfect world, teens would feel free to be more direct and even try to talk their friends out of smoking. In real life, no one wants to look like a geek. “They have to find a way to get out of the situation but save face,” Manetz said. “The perception is that I’m going to lose face if I don’t smoke. That risk is more important at that moment than the future risk from smoking. It’s hard to overcome that but it can be done if you have a plan.”

Self image is important too. Teens who smoke are more likely to get poor grades and be disruptive at school. They’re more likely to drink and use marijuana and other drugs. “It’s a downward spiral,” Manetz said. Building kids’ self-esteem may help them resist the allure of smoking.

But some kids have already tried cigarettes by age 12 and are addicted by 14. If that’s the case, get the child’s pediatrician or primary care physician involved, Manetz said. The process for helping kids kick the habit is very much like that for adults: nicotine replacement coupled with education, counseling and behavior modification.

For more information on programs to quit smoking, call Shore Cardiopulmonary Wellness Services in Onley at 757-787-8953.

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*Shore Health Services is an integrated healthcare delivery organization that includes Shore Memorial Hospital, Shore LifeCare at Parksley, Shore Rehab, Shore Cardiopulmonary Wellness Services, Shore Healthcare at Home, Shore Cancer Center, School of Practical Nursing, Shore Medical Center at Metompkin, Lingle & Goldstein Surgical Associates, Shore Orthopedic Associates, Shore Psychiatric Services and Senior Perspectives.
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