

## Teenage Girls and Cigarettes

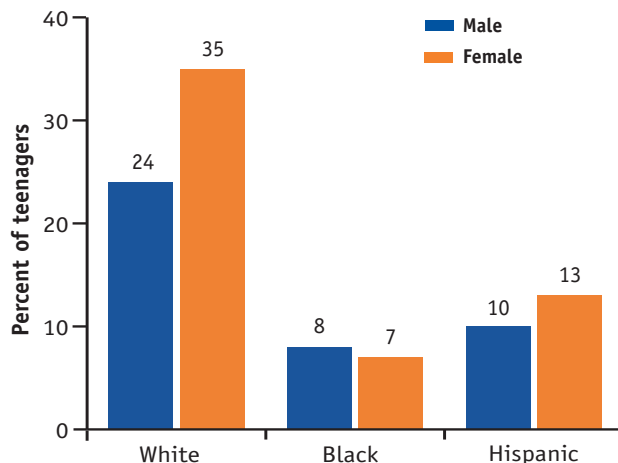
**“I don’t want to need it so badly...I don’t want to be sitting in class thinking about a cigarette...”**

According to the 2005 New York City Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), teenage girls smoke at higher rates than teenage boys, and white teenage girls smoke at higher rates than teenage girls of other racial-ethnic groups.

Many young smokers will continue to smoke into adulthood, causing permanent damage to their health and the health of others, and roughly one third of those adult smokers will die prematurely from smoking-related illnesses. About 11% of teens report smoking. Higher rates among white girls (35%) suggested a need to use a qualitative approach to explore the reasons young women

smoke, how they feel about addiction and quitting, and their reactions to media influences that promote or discourage smoking. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with female middle and high school students in a private New York City school during the 2004–2005 school year. Girls were asked open-ended questions that allowed for rich descriptions of their experiences and opinions. This report presents the findings of this study by describing themes that emerged and presenting teen girls’ quotes that represent how those who participated in the study discussed the theme.

Teenage smoking rates in NYC are highest among white girls



Data from the 2005 NYC Youth Risk Behavior Survey

### How Qualitative Research Helps Us Learn About Health Behaviors

Qualitative research (focus groups, in-depth interviews, and participant observation) provides rich descriptions of experiences, opinions, and shared meanings. It facilitates a better understanding of how people make sense of their world, and can be used to inform programs, messages, and research. While the data obtained through qualitative research cannot be expressed in numbers or used to represent a large population, they describe systems of communication, relationships, and behavior. The data in this report are not generalizable to all girls in New York City. Instead they represent patterns among participants of this study, focusing on the complex relationships between personal and social meanings of smoking, individual and cultural practices, and the environment in which these meanings and practices exist.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>From Ulin, PR, Robinson, ET, Tolley EE. 2005. *Qualitative Methods in Public Health Research*. San Francisco: Josse-Bass.

## Why Smoking Appeals to Teenage Girls

Participants feel that cigarettes demonstrate a level of experience, rebelliousness, and sophistication.

“Something as small as smoking a cigarette can lend an entire image to someone who doesn’t even know you. When I see a girl smoking, it lends the image of someone who’s like very open for everything or very experienced...” (Regular smoker, 10th grade)

The young women in this study think of cigarettes as accessories. Because of their cost, the girls see them as luxury items that portray wealth and elevated social status.

“... it’s like a certain image of ... being able to dish out \$8 to buy a pack of cigarettes, and it just goes with everything, you know, your perfectly polished hands...” (Regular smoker, 11th grade)

The teen girls in this study smoke as a way to relieve stress, anger, or depression.

“Sometimes I’ll be like, ‘Oh my God I’m really stressed. I want a cigarette,’ just because word of mouth is cigarettes, you know, decrease stress or whatever and who knows if that’s true, but it’s something to do.” (Regular smoker, 12th grade)

The participants see smoking as a way to meet people, especially older kids, and to be part of a social group.

“When you’re a smoker here, you have a clan... It’s a way to meet people and I’ve made so many friends since I’ve been here by smoking...” (Regular smoker, 11th grade)

Participants rarely reported starting smoking to lose weight, but for regular smokers, the threat of gaining weight was a reason to continue smoking.

Interviewer: “Can you put your finger on why you continue to smoke?”

Participant: “I don’t want to get fat.” (Regular smoker, 11th grade)

## Girls’ Smoking Behaviors

Most participants tried their first cigarette with friends and were often initiated into smoking by older kids.

“I was... at my best friend’s house who had an older sister... and one of her friends was like, ‘Oh, you want a cigarette?’ and me and my friends were like, ‘sure’ and that was that.” (Occasional smoker, 12th grade)

Even those participants who had never tried cigarettes admitted they would try smoking out of curiosity.

“There are things that you kind of expect yourself, as a teenager, to try at least once. Or other people will expect teenagers to try at least once... I’m pretty sure cigarettes is one of those things, where between 14 and 21 you have to try it.” (Non-smoker, 9th grade)

Many participants described learning the “correct” way to smoke from friends and teaching their less-experienced peers about smoking.

“This is what I told my friend, because she looked really funny smoking. You hold it ... in between the top of your finger and the top knuckle, and you hold just a little bit of the cigarette within your fingers...” (Regular smoker, 10th grade)

### Teenage Girls’ Reasons to Smoke

- The teenage girls in this study think cigarettes make them look experienced, rebellious, and sophisticated.
- Participants see cigarettes as accessories and luxuries, not unlike handbags and shoes.
- Smoking helps the girls in this study fit in with their friends and socialize with older kids.
- Participants see smoking as a way to deal with stress and depression.
- The girls in this study continue smoking because they’re afraid they’ll gain weight if they quit.

Some of the teen girls in the study steal cigarettes from parents, buy them using fake IDs, or ask adults to buy them. However, it is not uncommon for stores to sell cigarettes to underage people.

“There’s an amazing place in the Village and they’re notorious for just not carding ever.” (Regular smoker, 10th grade)

## Media Images and Smoking

Participants mentioned many media sources, such as books, movies, and magazines, as being inspirations for their smoking behavior. Nearly every participant, whether or not she smoked, mentioned the television show, *Sex and the City*, as being very influential.

“Whenever I think of how to smoke, it’s the way Sarah Jessica Parker exhales, and I’m like obsessed with her, I love her, and the way she exhales is very memorable. She kind of... elongates her neck and exhales into the air...” (*Regular smoker, 10th grade*)

When asked what kinds of anti-smoking messages people their age would listen to, the girls in the study said that it was important that messages come from either a peer or an adult who has experienced the pressure to smoke and whom teenagers respect. Messages should not be preachy, and should acknowledge that young females are savvy consumers of media.

“I mean, I think it’s better for it to come from other kids. I think you need a part that says this is why it’s bad for you and this is why you like shouldn’t do it. But then I think you also need a part that makes you actually think about it, you know... And you don’t want stupid videos about like peer pressure and stuff... you just need something that’s not fake.” (*Non-smoker, 9th grade*)

## Addiction and Quitting

While participants don’t worry about addiction when they start smoking, regular smokers fear the possibility of dependence.

“I’ve only once had like this crazy craving like, ‘Oh my God, I’ve got to have a cigarette.’ I didn’t and I was like, ‘Oh my God if I am getting addicted this is bad. I have to not have one for awhile.’ I really don’t want to be addicted to cigarettes.” (*Regular smoker, 12th grade*)

Many of the teenage girls in the study are already addicted.

“I get claustrophobic on the subway. I have stomach cramps. I get blurry. My head gets all jumbled and I can’t focus on anything. I get really cranky, you know? I have a really hard time trying to not smoke.” (*Regular smoker, 11th grade*)

Most of the participants who smoked regularly expressed a desire to quit smoking, but few had a plan of how to go about it.

“I’m cutting back gradually. Like, honestly, I don’t need to quit all the way. If I have one cigarette a day, I would be very, very pleased. But if I have an occasional cigarette, I’m fine with that. I just don’t want to buy packs. I don’t want to need it so badly. I don’t want to be sitting in class thinking about a cigarette, you know?” (*Regular smoker, 11th grade*)

### Teenage Girls’ Reasons Not to Smoke

- Participants express individuality through choosing not to smoke.
- Participants are afraid of becoming addicted and smoking into adulthood.
- For some of the girls in the study, there is peer pressure to stay away from smoking.
- Participants understand the health consequences of smoking.
- Many of the teens in the study have watched family members battle smoking-related illnesses.

## Recommendations

**Public health messages about smoking should acknowledge the many influences on young women's decision-making.**

- Teenage girls make their decisions about smoking based on a complex set of influences, including friends and the media. They respond best to messages that come from peers or adults with whom they relate and admire.
- Messages should not be preachy or discuss "coolness" or "peer pressure." While teen girls acknowledge these dynamics exist, they are turned off by messages that reference them.

**Parents, schools, and health care providers should begin educating kids about smoking at an early age since they are exposed to pro-smoking messages throughout their childhood.**

- Since many girls described making their first decisions about smoking in 6th or 7th grade, discussions about smoking should begin while they are still in elementary school.
- The many pro-smoking messages in the media should be addressed when talking to kids about smoking since these are particularly influential in this age group.

**Parents, schools, and health care providers should provide clear information about the dangers of addiction and strategies for quitting.**

- Young women underestimate how easy it is to become addicted to cigarettes, and many become addicted during their teenage years. The threat of addiction is a reason not to smoke, according to girls. Therefore, parents, schools, and health care providers should give clear facts about cigarette addiction.
- Teenage girls who said they wanted to quit smoking often didn't have a plan for how to do it. Parents, schools, and healthcare providers should provide information and resources on quitting.

For more information

The National Women's Health  
Information Center  
[4woman.gov/faq/smoking.htm](http://4woman.gov/faq/smoking.htm)

Teenage Girls & Smoking:  
Fact Sheet for Providers  
[depts.washington.edu/uwcoe/  
healthtopics/smoking/teens.html](http://depts.washington.edu/uwcoe/healthtopics/smoking/teens.html)

CDC Tobacco Tips 4 Youth  
[cdc.gov/tobacco/tips4youth.htm](http://cdc.gov/tobacco/tips4youth.htm)

For more information about teens and smoking, see NYC Vital Signs, Volume 5, No. 1.  
[nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/survey/survey-2006teensmoking.pdf](http://nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/survey/survey-2006teensmoking.pdf)

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