

Great American Smokout: Help is Available

Thursday November 19 is the American Cancer Society's (ACS) Great American Smokeout, designed to provide an opportunity for people who smoke to commit to healthy, smoke-free lives.

According to the ACS, more than 32 million American adults smoke cigarettes.

Smoking accounts for nearly about 1 in 5 deaths globally, and more than 16 million Americans live with a smoking-related disease.

Dr. Timir Baman is an OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute cardiologist. He says these numbers can be changed.

"Smoking is the number one preventable risk factor for cardiovascular disease that we know of," explained Dr. Baman. "For years and decades people smoked, and we saw that the rate of heart attacks went up. However, over the past few decades we've actually had success in decreasing smoking rates. Unfortunately, we are once again seeing an increase in smoking rates, especially in younger people, so I think that message that smoking is bad is still out there, but may not be as prevalent as it was."

Now, as we are faced with a global pandemic, Dr. Baman says recognizing the threat smoking poses to our health is more important than ever. In addition to compromised immune systems, many smokers already have lung problems that leave them more vulnerable to getting the flu, pneumonia or bronchitis. While research is still underway, the same could be true with COVID-19.

"Smoking damages the lungs and we know COVID damages the lungs as well," says Dr. Baman. "So if your lungs aren't 100%, the chances of you having a more significant reaction to COVID is higher, the chances of you going on a ventilator is higher. All of these things add up."

Quitting smoking is not easy. Cigarettes contain nicotine, and nicotine is highly addictive.

Not everyone can quit cold turkey, and that's okay. Sometimes it takes multiple tries to kick the habit. Dr. Baman hopes The Great American Smokeout will serve as motivation for smokers to continue the effort.

"For people who are on the fence, who know smoking is bad, they've been doing it, they've tried a little bit, this may give people a little motivation to try again. Often times it takes four, five, six, seven, eight times. And it's fine. As long as you get to the end destination of quitting smoking, it doesn't matter how many times it takes to get you there," says Dr. Baman.

Rates of cigarette smoking have declined from 42% in 1965 to 13.7% in 2019, but rates of e-cigarette use and vaping have increased significantly, especially among younger users. Dr. Baman says this trend is concerning, and e-cigarettes are not a safe alternative to cigarettes.

"E-cigarettes, that's not the answer. There are chemicals in those e-cigarettes. We don't even know what those chemicals are doing to people. There are numerous reports of having reactions to the chemicals, younger people going on ventilators. So people who think, 'Oh I'll just use e-cigarettes, that's my way out of this,' you may be in as much trouble or more trouble down the road. We just don't know at this point," he warns.

If you are ready to quit smoking, it is possible with the right tools and support. If you are struggling with a smoking addiction, ask your OSF HealthCare provider about available programs to help. Additional resources are also available on the [Lung & Pulmonology resource page](#) at osfhealthcare.org.