

# Youth & Tobacco

Tobacco use is one of the nation's leading health problems, killing more than 440,000 Americans and costing taxpayers more than \$38 billion each year nationwide.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 80 percent of adult tobacco users started smoking as teens; 35 percent had become daily smokers by age 18. With these statistics, it's no wonder that Big Tobacco spends \$11.2 billion each year marketing its product to American youth.

Each day, more than 2,000 youth will try smoking and get hooked on tobacco. The good news is that current cigarette smoking among US high school students has declined significantly, from 36 percent in 1997 to 29 percent in 2001.

Through smoke-free programs and state-sponsored anti-tobacco media campaigns, we are changing youth and societal attitudes regarding tobacco use.

Great American Smokeout challenges youth to turn creative thinking into action by planning activities that will make an impact in their communities, schools and cities. When planning an event, don't put one together just to do it. Be savvy and think about why you want the event and what goal you hope to achieve.

A well planned youth activity will:

- Inform youth of misleading social messaging that encourages tobacco use
- Empower youth with the skills to resist peer pressure to use tobacco
- Promote strong anti-tobacco attitudes among students
- Educate youth about the dangers of tobacco use

## School Activity Ideas

Here are some ideas for Great American Smokeout programs and activities that can be conducted in schools.

- Incorporate anti-tobacco messages into the curriculum, such as: smoking experiments in Science; essays on smoking in English; smoking equations in Math; effects of smoking in Health; and review cigarette ads to determine who tobacco companies target with their ads in Social Studies.
- Have students research and write stories for the school newspaper about the social and health consequences of smoking.
- Invite a local "Lost Chords" club, a club for people who have had their larynx removed because of cancer often caused by smoking. As the club members tell your students about the harmful effects of smoking, their raspy and mechanical voices show the effects.
- Hold a contest for the best stop smoking creation: a poster, essay, song, debate, radio or TV commercial, home video, editorial, poetry, slogan, banner, cartoon, joke, comedy routine, or no-smoking pledge.

- Organize high school and junior high students to put on a show for elementary school students in your district. The older kids learn from writing and producing a show while the younger kids learn from people they look up to. It's a fun idea that gets everyone involved.
- Work with local radio or TV stations to sponsor a public service announcement (PSA) contest. Students write the script for the PSA and a local radio/TV station produces it. The winning entry could be broadcast on the news, as part of Great American Smokeout celebrations in your community.
- Encourage students to "adopt" their parents or other loved ones who smoke. Students can promise to provide moral support and keep a watchful eye on their charges who are trying to quit as part of Great American Smokeout.
- Death By Tobacco is a powerful activity that illustrates the overwhelming number of people that die from tobacco related illness each day. This is illustrated by having a pre-selected number of youth choosing to paint their faces white and wear all black to illustrate "being" dead for the day. Students can also wear an "X" on their clothing, or paint a teardrop on their face. The pre-selected students attend class regularly or wander at will in and out of classrooms all day long. They do not talk to their peers, but if teachers address them, they respond. Youth give out handouts and stickers to everyone in their school, regarding the health risks of tobacco use and mortality rates of tobacco-related diseases. They also ask classmates to sign a petition to their local policymakers to change tobacco-related policy. A media or awareness event can also be coordinated to present policymakers with the petition.
- Has your favorite beach or park been ruined by dirty cigarette butts covering the ground? With just a couple students and a couple days, you may be able to clean up your favorite spot and restore the natural environment. Make sure to check with the city to receive a permit for the location of the clean up first.
- In the US, one person dies every 72 seconds from a tobacco-related disease. That's 1,200 people a day! There are ways to make that statistic real so students and your community stop and take notice. Find a part of your school or campus that has the most foot traffic throughout the day and (with permission) take a portion of the sidewalk. Have your group set up with as many people, posters and other props you can. Every 72 seconds, put a piece of black tape on the sidewalk or wall to make a tally of how many people have died from tobacco use so far that day. Be creative, and represent the lives lost through whatever methods will work for your school or organization. You may ask a specific number of students wear black for the day to represent the number of kids who are regular smokers and will eventually die from a tobacco-related illness. Or, you may ask your school for permission to line-up empty chairs or desks in the hallway to represent the number of youth who will die at the hands of tobacco.
- How do you get people to understand the effects that tobacco has on your school and community? Start by researching county statistics to find out how many people in your county died from tobacco last year. Then, create and pass out that many numbers to youth in your school the day before Great American Smokeout, but keep the meaning secret. The next day, place cards and flyers around the school explaining the numbers, giving them extra impact.
- There are more than 4,000 chemicals in a single cigarette, 69 of which are known

carcinogens. If smokers knew the kinds of things they were inhaling everyday, the glamour of smoking would quickly lose its appeal. As a class project, students can research the ingredients in a pack of cigarettes, then create a display to showcase these ingredients and other consumer products they are used in. Ingredients such as Arsenic (used in rat poison), Benzene (found in rubber cement), and Polonium-210 (a radioactive element).

- The fact is, most people don't smoke, and statistics show that 70 percent of those who do would like to quit. The percentage of US adults who reported cigarette smoking in 2000 ranged from 13 percent in Utah to 31 percent in Kentucky. Ask your students what percentage of adults smoke – then set the record straight. Click [here](#) to find helpful state statistics from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Ask some popular teens to come in and talk about why they don't smoke.
- Bring in the Grim Reaper! On average, 21.9 percent of high school students smoke, and we know that 33 percent of smokers will die prematurely from tobacco use. Have your students calculate the tobacco death rate at their school. Example: If a school has 1,200 students, multiply 0.219 by 1,200 to find the estimated number of student smokers (263). Then multiply the 263 by 0.33. In this case, 87 students will die prematurely of tobacco use. Make buttons that say, "Ask me! 87" to get conversations started! Or, use sidewalk chalk to draw chalk outlines, like those at murder scenes, on the sidewalks and in the parking lot. If no rain is predicted, you might want to do this on the eve of the Great American Smokeout.
- Personal stories speak louder than statistics. Have the young people you work with write down their own stories and share them with the public, perhaps during a school open house or in an exhibit at town hall or the public library.
- Cigarettes contain warning labels, but US labels are small and hard to read compared to those in Brazil and Canada, where rotating, picture-based warnings are mandatory. Some are graphic, addressing smoking and impotence. Australia, Poland, South Africa, and Thailand also passed more stringent labeling requirements than the US. Ask your students to create their own warning labels and display them in a public place. Then alert your local paper to a photo opportunity.
- Have your group write and perform a skit, or plan an assembly or presentation about the dangers of smoking and the benefits of quitting. After the presentation, ask members of the audience to stand or raise their hands if a loved one has died or been made ill from tobacco. Then look around and let the extent of tobacco's devastation sink in.
- If you are a parent, coach, teacher, or social worker, use the power of your influence. Many kids start smoking at age 11, and 90 percent of adult smokers began at or before age 18. So start the dialog about tobacco use by kindergarten! Discuss the false glamorization of tobacco; adopt and enforce a tobacco-free policy for players, coaches, and referees; and discuss how smoking can undermine athletic performance. Get Into Your Kid's Head, a helpful brochure from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, can be downloaded. Resources for teachers and coaches also can be found on the CDC site.
- Adolescents have a strong sense of right and wrong. Let them know how Big Tobacco has deceived the public for years. For some good quotes, or to learn how to ban smoking on your campus, read *Advocating for a Tobacco-Free Campus*. If they are motivated to take action, send them to [TobaccoFreeKids.org](http://TobaccoFreeKids.org) (once there, click on "Idea Marketplace")

and KickButtsDay.org. Kids in Dover, NH, for instance, created their own public service ads that were aired on a local radio station.

- Since 1997, the tobacco industry has contributed more than \$28 million to federal candidates, political parties, and political action committees. Ask your students to find out if their senators and representatives accept tobacco money. Visit [TobaccoFreeKids.org](http://TobaccoFreeKids.org) and click on the special report titled “Buying Influence, Selling Death.” Why on earth would a politician want to associate with an industry that causes \$155 billion in health care costs and lost productivity each year? Perhaps a letter-writing campaign is in order. Or, if your legislators have been supportive of local tobacco control programs, take the opportunity to say thanks.

### **Educating Younger Kids**

- Hold a contest for the best stop-smoking creation: poster, essay, song, poem, slogan, banner, joke, or no-smoking pledge.
- Hold an “I CAN Be Smoke-Free” program and donate non-perishable food items to a food pantry while signing a pledge to be smoke-free.
- Young children can “adopt” smoking parents. Ask kids to draw a picture of them and their parent enjoying an activity together. Parents receive a hug and the picture as they are asked to stop smoking for just one day.

Source: [acs.org](http://acs.org)