

## Consequences of a Smoker's Life

by John Wiseman

**I**t all began in an alley where I smoked my first cigarette when I was 16. It's been so long ago that I can't remember if I coughed or became woozy. I must have enjoyed this secret adventure because I continued it for more than a half century. Now I have severe emphysema.

That first cigarette was the beginning of my long slide to an addiction that intensified until it became a consuming and destructive habit. Some physicians say it can be as addictive as heroin. It can also become as deadly. However, you don't go to jail for selling or smoking cigarettes; and you can function perfectly well while doing it until it takes its toll on your lungs. Eventually, it can significantly lessen the quality of your life and progressively shorten it. Unless, of course, you're smart and give it up.

A professor of public health at the University of Michigan, Kenneth Warner, hit the nail on the head when he recently told a *New York Times* interviewer that "it would be ridiculous to suggest a 16-year-old kid who has no idea what addiction means and feels immortal is a rational decision maker when it comes to smoking."<sup>1</sup> Years later, when the realization kicks in, it becomes increasingly difficult to quit as smoking becomes an integral part of your daily life and the reasons to continue the moments of pleasure multiply.

For much longer than I am willing to concede, I thought smoking a cigarette with my morning coffee stirred creative ideas. Now I know that emphysema has severely hampered the physical part of my life, and my chronic struggle to breathe during the course of the day wipes me out by nightfall. Moreover, my incapacity for significant physical labor has increased so that my wife

now has to do what I once did. Watching her (with an ailing back) perform my chores depresses me (a common result of emphysema).

### What is there to lose?

So take a deep breath, then think about what you can lose by smoking every day over a long period of time. I have said goodbye to some of my treasured pleasures.

I have a lifelong passion for baseball but now am reluctant to attend major league baseball games because the stadium may be filled with germs as well as baseballs. Because I run out of strength easily, I no longer play ball with my grandsons. Moreover, my lungs will no longer tolerate fishing in my beloved Rocky Mountains. The last time I was there, I ended up in a hospital in Denver. It's not just the high altitude that can leave you gasping for air. An unpredictable lung infection caused by a ubiquitous viral bug compromised my respiration, trapping carbon dioxide inside my lungs, and landed me in hospitals in Albuquerque (where I brought down a plane for an emergency landing) and in San Diego, which I thought was the safest place in the country for me. High humidity and/or temperature

can leave me gasping for air anywhere, so long distance travel is no longer easy. Still, I persist in it, doing what I have learned to prevent flare-ups and going where we have family support for my wife should my preventive measures fail and I need hospitalization.

What I failed to learn years ago was the importance of paying serious attention to the signs of the creeping dangers of smoking. I first detected trouble breathing while climbing a hill in the Lake Country in England more than a decade ago. I also began to forgo fishing some of my

### about the author...



John Wiseman is professor emeritus of history at Frostburg State University and lives in Cumberland, MD.

favorite holes that I could not climb out of without the help of a good friend. Now I haven't fished a stream in two years. Had I stopped on our return from England or followed my wife's earlier no-smoking vow, I might still be fishing and playing catch with my grandsons. The main lesson is not to start smoking.

Emphysema, a form of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, is an irreversible, progressive disease that advances with your smoking life. Yet, it can be arrested, giving you more to look forward to. I recently met an example of this in a reformed smoker in his late 30s who was pleased as punch that he had quit nine months ago. He is looking forward to an unhampered life. So, make up your own "bucket list" of personal dreams for your future and put the money you spend on cigarettes in it.

### Ray of hope

I often wonder why little national attention is given to this debilitating and deadly phenomenon experienced by millions of Americans, not to mention the huge medical cost to the nation and large job loss/sick leave resulting from smoking. I get multiple daily requests in the mail for money from a growing number of health organizations, but there's nothing to help smokers understand how, why, and when your lungs collapse and the optimum time to prevent what happens to long-time smokers like me. One-half million Americans will die prematurely this year from smoke-related causes, but we hear little about this and other alarming facts about this overlooked disease. For more details see: [www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/reports/50-years-of-progress/50-years-of-progress-by-section.html](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/reports/50-years-of-progress/50-years-of-progress-by-section.html).

There is a ray of hope, however. The COPD Foundation's national Pulmonary Education Program with the catchy title PEP has launched an extensive education program. To subscribe to and support the COPD Foundation, log on to [www.COPDFoundation.org](http://www.COPDFoundation.org) or call their toll-free COPD Information Line: 1-866-316-COPD (2673). For starters, I recommend you request the Foundation's dramatic one-page graph, "The Impact of Smoking."

On a personal note, let me express my gratitude to my wife — who has endured my bouts with depression, my irritability, and my limited strength, and who has monitored my medications — to note some of her most noteworthy support efforts. I mention her role because it is critically important and probably lacking in elderly families where the support is needed most. I am also thankful for the enduring help of Stacey Blank, a respiratory therapist at the Western Maryland Health System in Cumberland, MD, (and a member of PEP). Because of the high incidence of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and tobacco use in nearby West Virginia and the health system's home county, Allegany, this system, with its extensive support staff, provides great value. I wish there were more of both the above-mentioned enablers and well-equipped hospitals in more places.

Finally, think about your future before you light up a cigarette in the morning. That momentary pleasure can cost you dearly in the future. ■

### REFERENCE

1. A misguided tobacco proposal. *The New York Times*, (2014, Aug. 9) p. A18.

