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Marin Voice: Latest report on smoking should be reason for action

By Jennie Cook and Aglaia Panos

POSTED: 11/16/15, 2:19 PM PST | UPDATED: ON 11/16/2015
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Exposure to tobacco smoke — even occasional smoking or secondhand smoke — causes immediate damage to your body that can lead to serious illness or death, according to a recently released report by U.S. Surgeon General Regina M. Benjamin.

Even one cigarette can be damaging, according to the report. “The chemicals in tobacco smoke reach your lungs quickly every time you inhale causing damage immediately,” Benjamin said in releasing the report. “Inhaling even the smallest amount of tobacco smoke can also damage your DNA, which can lead to cancer.”

According to local tobacco control experts, teens and 18- to 24-year-olds tend to fall into the category of “social smokers” who usually smoke more than they believe, according to research conducted by the state Tobacco Control Program. The Marin County Tobacco-related Disease Control Program currently funds programs to assist school-aged youth, 18- to 24-year-olds, people of all age groups including single parents, professionals and “secret (closet) smokers.” This valuable program continues to be provided by the highly effective smoking cessation program at Bay Area Community Resources (bacr.org or call 415-755-2399).

The report, “How Tobacco Smoke Causes Disease: The Biology and Behavioral Basis for Smoking-Attributable Disease,” finds that cellular damage and tissue inflammation from tobacco smoke are immediate, and that repeated exposure weakens the body’s ability to heal the damage.

Tobacco smoke contains a deadly mixture of more than 7,000 chemicals and compounds, of which hundreds are toxic and at least 70 cause cancer.

Every exposure to these cancer-causing chemicals could damage DNA in a way that leads to cancer. Smoking causes more than 85 percent of lung cancers and can cause cancer almost anywhere in the body.

One in three cancer deaths in the U.S. is tobacco-related. The report describes how the delicate lining of the lungs becomes inflamed as soon as it is exposed to the chemical mixture in cigarette smoke. Over time, the smoke can cause chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, including emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

Even brief exposure to second-hand smoke can cause cardiovascular disease and could trigger acute cardiac events, such as heart attack, according to the report.

The Smoke-Free Marin Coalition has been working hard since 1990 to reduce non-smoker's exposure to second- and third-hand smoke. We continue to work to change the public environments that support smoking, including a recent campaign to eliminate smoking in entrances, outdoor cafes (common youth smoking hangouts), and multi-unit housing where non-smokers are forced to inhale their neighbors' smoke during peak smoking hours.

Four Marin communities: Larkspur, Mill Valley, Fairfax and Tiburon are now considering model ordinances similar to the city of Novato's ordinance. The county, Ross and San Anselmo have taken some partial steps in the past three years.

A few other Marin communities have not yet contacted us for assistance but we look forward to helping these communities analyze their smoke-free policies and youth tobacco access ordinances, which have not been updated since before today's teen smokers were born.

The Smoke-Free Marin Coalition has worked on addressing the problems of tobacco use for the past 20 years and we won't stop until families stop having to face the preventable loss of their loved ones to tobacco use.

Jennie Cook of Larkspur is chair of Smoke-Free Marin Coalition and Aglaia Panos is president of the Marin County Pharmacists Association.