Friends say, 'Smoke!' [1]

Dear Alice,

Hi! Your site is very helpful. I have a few friends who smoke. We are friends since the past four years; they started smoking about a year ago. They tell me to smoke, I don't do it, so they call me a jerk. I have never TOUCHED a cigarette in my life.

(1) Should I smoke?
(2) If I smoke one cigarette about once a week, will it harm me in any way?
(3) Will it make me a chain smoker?
(4) Which is the safest brand of cigarette, health wise?

Very Confused

Answer

Dear Very Confused,

It sounds like you are faced with a pretty common dilemma: wanting to make your own decisions about your behaviors while your friends are putting on the pressure. Kudos to you for seeking out more information so that you can weigh the options in your own mind (you might even share what you learn with your friends).

People start smoking for many different reasons. Some do it because they think it looks cool. Others saw their family members or older friends smoking and might consider the habit "a grown up thing to do" or, perhaps, a mark of maturity. Some people like the feelings commonly associated with smoking like relaxation and stress relief [2]. Tobacco companies spend large amounts of money each year to make potential customers believe that smoking is fun and fashionable. And much like the situation you might identify with, another factor influencing the motivation to start smoking stems from pressure from peers. Some people are concerned that they won't be accepted if they refuse; or, they say yes to something offered to them because they want to seem gracious. Many continue to smoke cigarettes not because they want to, but because they're addicted to nicotine and have trouble quitting [3].
Here are some considerations to keep in mind as you make your decision to smoke or not to smoke:

- You ask if only one cigarette a week will harm you. Many people start smoking with the intention of being a social smoker and just doing it once in a while. However, cigarettes contain nicotine, a highly addictive substance with a very fast acting effect (most people feel the stimulant effect within ten seconds of use). It may make you feel calm and relaxed, stimulate your mood, make you feel more alert, and decrease your appetite. However, once the initial buzz wears off, you may feel tired and wanting that buzz to return (which may make you light up another cigarette). These factors may make you want to continue to smoke and will make it increasingly difficult for you to stop.

- The health risks associated with smoking certainly increase when the quantity and frequency of use goes up. Check out the Go Ask Alice! Cigarettes, Chewing Tobacco, & Other Nicotine archive for more about the effects smoking has on your body.

- Something else to consider is how much second-hand smoke you’re exposed to while hanging out with your smoking peers. Studies have shown that non-smokers suffer the negative effects associated with lighting up when they breathe the air that smokers exhale.

- You also ask which brand is the safest. Well, while a number of varieties of cigarettes claim to contain less tar and/or less nicotine, these products still have the same addictive and health-related consequences as other cigarettes. There is no safe cigarette.

You mentioned that your friends have been calling you a jerk when you choose not to smoke with them. Do you want to hang out with people who call you names and encourage you to do things that you don’t want to do or may harm you? If your friends don’t support you and your decisions, it may be time to reconsider those friendships. You also emphasized the fact that you haven’t TOUCHED a cigarette in your life. If you’re interested in keeping it that way, one way to handle peer pressure is to be clear and consistent with your responses. “No, thank you” is fine to say and it’s okay to leave it at that. You don’t have to give reasons or justify your choice. Good luck as you make your decision!

Alice!

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