Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Tobacco Smoking

Key Messages:

1. Although there is currently not enough evidence to be certain that people who smoke tobacco are at higher risk of being infected with the coronavirus (COVID-19), we know that people who smoke are at higher risk of respiratory tract (including lung) infections.

2. There is growing evidence that people who smoke tobacco are more likely to have severe complications if they do become infected with COVID-19. It is not yet clear how long a person needs to quit smoking to reduce their risk of these complications.

3. It is always a good time to quit smoking! It is well-established that stopping smoking improves lung function relatively quickly (within a few months,) which reduces susceptibility to respiratory illnesses and improves immune function, along with many other benefits not directly linked to COVID-19.

Current Smokers and COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic is evolving too rapidly for conclusive evidence to have emerged on the impact of smoking on an individual's susceptibility to COVID-19 infection. However, there is overwhelming evidence that people who smoke are at higher risk of getting lung and chest infections, which can be caused by other respiratory viruses (such as influenza) and also bacteria (for instance, tuberculosis.) **This means that it is more likely that people who smoke have a higher risk of getting COVID-19 compared to people who don't smoke.**

There is growing evidence to suggest that people who smoke are likely to be more severely impacted by COVID-19 if they do become infected, because smoking damages the lungs so that they don't work as well. For example, lungs naturally produce mucus, but people who smoke have more and thicker mucus that is hard to clean out of the lungs. This mucus clogs the lungs and is prone to becoming infected. Smoking also affects the immune system, making it harder to fight infection.

Former Smokers and COVID-19

It is not currently known if former smokers have a higher risk of becoming infected compared than people who have never smoked. People who smoke are at increased risk of lung infections in general, but the lungs do heal relatively rapidly when people stop smoking. It is not yet known how long is long enough to reduce the risk to the same as someone who has never smoked. However, it is well-established that stopping smoking improves lung function within a few months. Rates of lung infections like bronchitis and pneumonia also decrease. **If you previously smoked and are now quit, it is likely you will have a lower risk of severe complications (if you become infected) than you would have if you were still smoking.**

Nonsmokers and COVID-19

Although we don't know the specific effects of SHS exposure on risk of COVID-19 infection, we do know that exposure to SHS also damages lungs and depresses the immune system, increasing susceptibility to chest and respiratory infections.

Source

Quit Victoria. "FAQs – Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Smoking." [Available here].