

CHILDREN WHO SMOKE AT GREATER RISK FOR DEPRESSED MOOD

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Tobacco smoking in late childhood and early adolescence signals the onset of depressed mood, according to a report in the December (1999) issue of the American Journal of Public Health. Experts say the data shed light on the long-suspected association between smoking and depression.

In response to a previous study linking tobacco use and depression in teenagers, researchers interviewed over 2,000 boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 14. Children who smoked cigarettes or experienced depressed moods prior to the study were excluded. Consistent with similar research, depressed mood was defined as a bad mood, sadness, irritability, or desire to cry lasting two weeks or more.

In all, almost 600 participants developed depressed mood and over 200 started smoking between interviews one year apart. Statistical analysis showed that tobacco smoking modestly increased risk of depressed mood, although depressed mood did not increase risk for tobacco smoking. Also, prior use of alcohol was not associated with an increased risk of depressed mood but was associated with an increased risk of tobacco smoking.

Researchers say the findings do not support a common factor theory that assumes a shared vulnerability to both tobacco smoking and depressed mood. Nor do they support a theory of self-medication that implies depression leads to early-onset tobacco smoking. These researchers' observations are more consistent with theories that assume tobacco smoking affects depressed mood through the central nervous system or thyroid function. The researchers found that their results were consistent with observations on smoking cessation and depression. This research also supports the findings of an adult study that showed major depression predicts a progression to daily smoking among smokers, but not among nonsmokers. Additionally, another landmark study of depressed children showed a high incidence of depressed parents, so therefore, family history could be a confounding factor here, and more research is needed to validate the results.