

Higher tax is an incentive to quit smoking

by *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Smokers began paying dramatically higher prices on Wednesday. The federal cigarette tax jumped by 62 cents a pack to \$1.01. Levies on other tobacco products also rose.

Obviously, smokers are upset. But this is an excellent opportunity to do what most tobacco users consistently say they want to do: quit smoking.

About seven in 10 smokers say they want to stop smoking, and with good reason. People who do significantly reduce their risk of dying prematurely.

They also reduce the risk of harming others around them — especially children — with their smoke. Children raised with a smoker have much higher rates of asthma, as well as more frequent and more severe respiratory infections.

Because money raised by the higher cigarette tax will fund health care for poor children, many smokers say they're being forced to subsidize services for others. But the truth is that the rest of us subsidize them. We've been doing it for years.

Even with higher federal taxes, smokers don't come close to covering the costs they impose on society. Cigarettes would have to sell for \$10.28 a pack to recoup all that money.

In the United States, the direct medical cost of tobacco-related illness — what we pay for doctors, hospitals, surgery and extras like oxygen — is nearly \$97 billion a year. The cost to Medicare is about \$19 billion, while Medicaid programs shell out about \$31 billion.

No other preventable cause of illness and death — not drinking, obesity or even illegal drug use — comes close to the toll inflicted by tobacco. It kills nearly 440,000 Americans every year and sickens millions more.

Of course, most smokers already are aware of those grim statistics. What they don't know is how to stop.

Research shows that the most successful tobacco cessation starts with advice and counseling from your

doctor. Physicians can prescribe drugs, Zyban and Chantix, that reduce cravings for cigarettes.

Nicotine-replacement products also can reduce withdrawal symptoms. They're available over the counter at drug and discount stores.

People who get support and counseling also improve the odds of successfully quitting. They're offered at many hospitals, as well as by voluntary health groups like the American Lung Association and the American Cancer Society. Both groups also offer free online resources.

It's not easy to quit smoking, but millions of Americans have done it. The health benefits are immediate and long lasting.

Nobody likes to pay higher taxes. But they will provide a new incentive for many smokers — and especially many young smokers — to quit.

Besides, there's one sure-fire way to stop paying higher cigarette taxes: Stop smoking.

The American Lung Association offers information about local resources at 1-800-586-4872 and help with its Freedom From Smoking program at www.ffsonline.org. The American Cancer Society is online at www.cancer.org.

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