

## **A Pack a Day Doesn't Keep the Doctor Away...**

### ***Information about tobacco use and how to help you or someone you love quit***

The last three weeks I have been able to spend in Unalaska working at the clinic has been a wonderful experience that I will never forget. I have been charmed by the friendly and hardy people of this community and by the beautiful surroundings.

As I have gotten to know the town and its people I have been alarmed by the prevalence of tobacco use. Alaska has one of the highest tobacco use rates in the country and Unalaska is no exception. Many of the patients and people I talked with about tobacco use estimated that 70-100% of their coworkers smoke or use chewing tobacco. In this article I will address some of the facts about tobacco use and offer some suggestions and resource available to help people here in Unalaska quit using tobacco.

***Why should I stop smoking or chewing anyway?*** Most people today know that smoking and chewing aren't good for them but here are a few facts about tobacco use and some good reasons to think about quitting.

- More than 400,000 people die each year due to cancer, heart disease, strokes and lung problems caused by tobacco use. This makes tobacco the leading cause of preventable death in America
- Secondhand smoke is the third leading cause of preventable death in the nation.
- Infants and children under 18 months experience more than 300,000 lung infections each year in the U.S. due to second hand smoke.
- Pregnant mothers who smoke put their babies at a three times higher risk for dying from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
- Smokeless tobacco is also very harmful to your health and is known to cause deadly cancers and contribute to heart disease.
- Smoking and chewing costs a lot! Most people could save several thousand dollars a year if they stop using tobacco.

The good news is that while there is irreversible damage that smoking does to your body, the minute you stop smoking your health begins improving!

***So I know that I should quit but I don't know how. I've tried before and it didn't work.*** Making the decision to quit smoking or chewing is one of the best and smartest decisions you will ever make but it is also going to be one of the hardest. Even though quitting tobacco use is very difficult, it's worth it to you and those you love. Millions of Americans every year stop smoking and chewing and you can do it too!

There are three steps to quit tobacco use: 1. Deciding to quit, 2. Planning to quit, 3. Staying on course with your plan.

To help you with these steps the State of Alaska has provided a service to anyone living in the state. The state maintains a 24 hour a day 7 day a week telephone hotline, called the Quit Line, at **1-888-842-QUIT** (7848). When you call the hotline you will have a 20-30 minute consultation with a trained nurse who will answer any questions you have about quitting tobacco use and assist you in developing a plan. You will be mailed a packet of information and you may qualify to receive Nicotine Replacement Therapy patches. After starting your plan you will receive follow up support for a year. The best part is that this is all free!

While different plans and methods have helped many people quit, some studies have shown that for many people a combination of counseling / support, nicotine replacement therapy, and prescription drugs, like Zyban are most effective. You may want to visit with a health care provider about whether prescriptions drug therapy might be appropriate for you. Many insurance companies cover doctor visits and prescriptions for people who are trying to stop tobacco use. To set up an appointment with one of the doctor or physicians assistants at the clinic, call 581-1202.

If you aren't successful initially, it is important to remember not to give up or become discouraged. For many people it may take several tries to quit. As I mentioned before, quitting tobacco use is one hardest things you will ever do, but it is worth it for you and those you love. Don't give up! Decide that you want to live a tobacco free life today. Call the state hotline today and consider making an appointment with a health care provider to talk about prescription drug therapy to stop using tobacco.

***About the author:***

Tom Quimby is a medical student from the University of Washington. He spent 4 weeks in Unalaska working at the community health clinic as part of a rural and underserved opportunities program. He was born and raised in Alaska and plans to return to practice in the state upon completing medical school. From Unalaska he will travel to Cambodia for a month with a volunteer medical team to provide health clinics to rural villages before returning to school in Seattle. He can be contacted by email at:

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The author on top of Pyramid Peak on a rare sunny day in Unalaska.