

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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One-year follow up of college student occasional smokers

EDITOR—The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now includes both daily and occasional (less than daily) smokers in its cigarette smoking prevalence data.¹ However, there is disagreement in the literature on the extent to which occasional smoking is a transitional or stable stage of smoking.^{2,5} We found a high rate of occasional smoking (11.3%) among American college students.² We also found that the heaviest smoking occasional smokers had smoked for the shortest period of time, suggesting that heavier occasional smoking may be an especially short transitional stage.²

The best way to clarify the longer term outcome of occasional smoking is through a prospective study. College students taking introductory psychology classes at Ball State University were asked to volunteer for a follow-up study if they met the CDC criteria for occasional smoking (having smoked at least 100 cigarettes in one's lifetime, and now smoking on some days but not every day). Participants were recruited separately, but from a similar population, as in our previously reported anonymous survey.² Fifty-two people (25 men and 27 women) agreed to participate. In the one-year follow up, 50 (24 men and 26 women) of the original 52 participants were contacted by telephone or in person.

At the start of the study, participants were asked their current smoking frequency, the length of time they had smoked, and whether they had ever been a regular smoker. At the one-year follow up, participants were first asked if they still smoke. If not, they were asked when they had quit. If yes, they were asked how much they currently smoke, whether they had tried to quit in the past year, and if they had become a regular (daily) smoker in the past year.

Most (54%) occasional smokers had stopped smoking during the past year, 34% were still occasional smokers, and 12% had become regular smokers. Many quitters reported stopping during the summer break (42%) or Christmas break (12%). They had stopped smoking for a mean of 6.6 months (SD=2.2) at follow up.

The table shows the follow-up smoking status as a function of initial smoking characteristics. The only initial characteristic significantly related to outcome smoking status was the number of cigarettes smoked per week: $F(2,47) = 3.97, P = 0.025$. As shown in the table, the small number who became regular smokers had been the heaviest initial

Table 1 Initial smoking characteristics and smoking status at one-year follow up for 50 occasional smokers

Smoking status at follow up	Number	Initial characteristics			
		Cigarettes per week*	Years smoked	Prior regular† (%)	Quit attempt‡ (%)
Quit	27	5.0	2.3	41	NA
Occasional	17	7.8	3.1	41	18
Regular	6	10.3	1.2	0	50

* $P = 0.025$.

† "Prior regular" is the percentage of each group who were ever previously regular smokers.

‡ "Quit attempt" is the percentage of each non-quitting group who tried to quit during the follow-up year.

NA = not applicable.

smokers, despite having smoked for the shortest time period. This finding is consistent with our earlier retrospective survey.² We were surprised that none of those who had previously been regular smokers returned to regular smoking. There were relatively few unsuccessful quit attempts. Of those who tried to stop in the follow-up year, 83% succeeded.

Almost all college students who smoke plan to stop within the next five years and about two-thirds report prior attempts to stop, averaging about one attempt a year.⁵ This is virtually the same proportion having tried to quit as seen among the occasional smokers in our longitudinal study. Thus occasional smokers report similar quitting patterns as regular smokers, but much more success at quitting when they attempt to stop.

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Smoking prevalence in younger Italians

EDITOR—We investigated the age-specific prevalence of smoking in Italy using data from the 1990-91 and the 1994 (first cycle) National Health Surveys, conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) on samples of 55 989 and 13 048 individuals aged 15 or over, respectively.^{1,2}

The design of the National Health Surveys has already been described.^{1,2} Briefly, interviews were organised and conducted by civil servants appointed by each municipality included in the study on samples of 25 878 households in the 1990-91 survey and of 5700 households in the first cycle of the 1994 survey, randomly selected within strata of geographical area (region), size of the municipality and of the household, to be representative, on a regional level, of the general Italian population. The 12 metropolitan areas (over 250 000 inhabitants) were included, together with a random sample of other municipalities, stratified in four levels according to geographical area and size of the municipality. No substitution was allowed, and the overall participation rate was over 90%. Proxy interviews were permitted for members not present in the house (about a quarter of the study samples). All interviews were conducted in the houses of the families identified.

Questions on smoking included smoking status (never/former/current smoker), type of tobacco product mainly smoked (including a distinction between filter and non-filter cigarettes), average number of cigarettes or pipes/cigars smoked per day, duration of smoking in years, and (for ex-smokers) time (years) since stopping.

We obtained a copy of the original computer tape from ISTAT, including all available information for each subject interviewed. Information on smoking was elicited only for those above age 14. Consequently, subjects below age 15 were not considered, thus leaving total samples of 27 135 males and 28 854 females in the 1990-91 survey, and 6307

- 1 US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Cigarette smoking among adults—United States, 1992, and changes in definition of smoking. *MMWR* 1994;43:342-6.
- 2 Hines, D. Occasional smoking in American college students. *Tobacco Control* 1995;4:294.
- 3 Shiffman S. Tobacco "chippers"—individual differences in tobacco dependence. *Psychopharmacology* 1989;97:539-47.
- 4 Shiffman S, Fischer LB, Zettler-Segal M, Benowitz NL. Nicotine exposure among non-dependent smokers. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 1991; 47:333-6.
- 5 Evans NJ, Gilpin E, Pierce JP, et al. Occasional smoking among adults: evidence from the California Tobacco Survey. *Tobacco Control* 1992;1:169-75.
- 6 Hines, D. Young smokers' attitudes about methods for quitting smoking: Barriers and benefits to using assisted methods. *Addict Behav* 1996; 21:1-5.

Table 1 Self-reported smoking prevalence (%), and corresponding standard errors (SE), by age and sex, Italy, 1990-91 and 1994 National Health Surveys

Age groups (years)	Males		Females	
	1990-91 % (SE)	1994 % (SE)	1990-91 % (SE)	1994 % (SE)
15-24	28.9 (0.9)	19.8 (1.3)	17.0 (0.6)	9.9 (1.0)
25-34	43.3 (0.9)	42.0 (1.9)	26.1 (0.7)	22.8 (1.3)
35-44	45.7 (1.0)	42.3 (1.9)	26.1 (0.7)	29.1 (1.6)
45-54	42.6 (1.0)	39.8 (2.0)	17.8 (0.6)	19.9 (1.4)
55-64	35.3 (0.9)	31.0 (2.3)	12.3 (0.5)	12.6 (1.3)
65-74	29.0 (1.1)	22.3 (1.8)	6.7 (0.4)	7.2 (0.9)
≥ 75	18.8 (1.0)	16.7 (2.2)	2.2 (0.3)	2.5 (0.7)
Total	37.2 (0.4)	32.6 (0.7)	17.4 (0.2)	16.3 (0.4)
No of subjects	27 135	6307	28 854	6741