

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Consumers' knowledge and beliefs about the safety of cigarette filters

EDITOR,—The primary purpose of the cigarette filter is reduction of tar in tobacco smoke.^{1,2} Filters also keep tobacco flakes out of smokers' mouths.¹ The standard filter used on cigarettes today contains 15 000 fibres per filter.¹

Several studies have demonstrated that the filter material (cellulose acetate fibres) can become detached.³⁻⁷ Pauly and colleagues have recently observed cigarette filter fibres in human lung specimens, indicating that the material is respirable.⁸ A study of filter fibres implanted in mice for six months demonstrated that fibres resist biodegradation.⁵ As a result of burning tobacco, the discharged fibres are also coated with tobacco tar, which contains carcinogens.⁵ Such inhaled filter fibres may pose a previously undefined health risk to the smoker beyond exposure to the chemical toxins found in tobacco smoke.⁵

We have found no mention of the problem of filter fibre fallout in advertisements for filtered cigarettes. On the contrary, consumer surveys demonstrate that many smokers believe that filtered cigarettes reduce the risks of smoking.⁹⁻¹¹

This study was undertaken to explore consumers' beliefs about cigarette filter safety and the ingestion/inhalation of cigarette filter fibres. Fifty three current smokers and 24 former smokers were interviewed while waiting in line at a division of motor vehicles office in Erie County, New York in the summer of 1997. Fewer than 5% of those approached refused to participate in the survey interview. Overall, the sample was 52% male and 48% female; 56% were aged 40 years or younger. A current smoker was defined as someone who has smoked 100 cigarettes in one's lifetime and currently smokes. Two thirds of the current smokers smoked more than 15 cigarettes per day. A former smoker was defined as someone who had smoked 100 cigarettes in one's lifetime, but who was not currently smoking at the time of the interview. Most of the former smokers (91%) had discontinued their smoking more than two years before the interview. All but two respondents (one current smoker and one former smoker) reported past use of filter tipped cigarettes.

The brief (approximately 10 minute) survey was administered by a trained research assistant who asked a series of questions designed to measure beliefs about the safety and benefits of cigarette filters. Table 1 displays the responses of smokers and former smokers to six questions. These data demonstrate that most consumers believe that: (1) filters make cigarettes safer; (2) are unaware of the possibility of loose fibres from cigarette

Table 1 Beliefs about the safety of cigarette filters and the problem of filter fibre fallout

Question	Smokers n (%)	Former smokers n (%)
Do you think a filter makes a cigarette safer than the same cigarette without a filter?	Yes 30 (58) No 22 (42)	14 (58) 10 (42)
Have you ever noticed if the filter material comes off in your mouth when you smoke?	Yes 3 (6) No 49 (94)	1 (4) 22 (96)
Have you ever heard of any research on whether filter material can get into smokers' lungs?	Yes 11 (21) No 42 (79)	4 (17) 19 (83)
If cigarette filter fibres are inhaled into the lungs or eaten, would you consider this an additional health risk beyond the exposure to tobacco itself?	Yes 47 (90) No 5 (10)	22 (96) 1 (4)
If you were to learn that some of the filter material is inhaled into your lungs, would this new knowledge increase your chances of quitting?	Yes 26 (50) No 27 (50)	NA
If cigarette fibres become loose, and the cigarette companies are aware of this, do you think they have an obligation to warn the public about this?	Yes 53 (100) No 0 (0)	24 (100) 0 (0)

filters being ingested and/or inhaled into their lungs during smoking; and (3) cigarette companies should be required to inform consumers about potential for filter fibre fallout. Also, it appears that knowledge about the filter fibre fallout problem might influence at least some smokers to give up cigarettes. Although the sample was not selected to be representative of the entire US population, the consistency of responses across different age, sex, and smoking status groups strongly suggests that the findings from this survey would be reflective of the views of most consumers.

The health benefits associated with putting filter tips on cigarettes continues to be a hotly debated issue.¹²⁻¹⁴ It is now clear that cigarette filters do not make cigarette smoking a safe behaviour and may actually introduce smokers to new risks not associated with unfiltered cigarettes.

Smokers favour being better informed about the health risks of smoking.¹⁵ Cigarette manufacturers should be required to inform consumers about the potential for ingesting/inhaling filter material during smoking. In addition, cigarette manufacturers should be encouraged and/or required to utilise technology to design cigarette filters so as to reduce the problem of filter fibre fallout.¹⁶

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Smoking prevalence in New South Wales correctional facilities, 2000

EDITOR,—Since 1974, periodic national smoking prevalence studies have been published for the general Australian population.¹ However, similar studies on prison populations are non-existent. We report the results of a survey carried out during the year 2000 in 21 of 23 New South Wales (NSW) correctional facilities. These facilities contain about 93% of the state's total prison population.

We assessed smoking prevalence indirectly by auditing the weekly shopping lists presented by inmates in each facility for at least two consecutive weeks June to November 2000. We calculated the average number of inmates presenting shopping lists as well as the average number of inmates buying tobacco. These shopping lists are usually for non-food items, as food is provided for all inmates. Inmates found to have