

Smokers may be one puff closer to chronic disease

It's now the fifth leading cause of death in Canada and the only one that's increasing in prevalence in North America, yet its name is almost unknown to the general public. It strikes as young as age 45, and usually targets long-term smokers. It's not lung cancer, but rather an illness called chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or COPD.

COPD is a term that refers to a group of long-term lung disorders that

include, for the most part, chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Asthma may also be present, but is usually seen by doctors as a separate problem. COPD results in a chronic blockage of air flow to and from the lungs causing shortness of breath and often coughing, wheezing and bouts of bronchitis.

The disease develops slowly over many years with symptoms 'creeping up' after 20 to 30 years of smoking. Eventually, the

disease can become totally debilitating, preventing people from doing the most simple everyday tasks. People with advanced COPD may require extra oxygen and even life support in an intensive care unit.

But, according to a new survey of Canadians who have smoked a pack a day for 20 years, smokers do not link breathlessness, wheeziness, cough, and phlegm production with poor lung health. In fact,

more than half of those surveyed said they were used to feeling this way.

The national telephone survey was recently conducted for Boehringer Ingelheim Canada Ltd. by Dr. Robert Coombs, a recognized health promotion expert on smoking and lung disease. The survey consisted of in-depth interviews with 133 long-term smokers with an average age of 47. Most respondents began smoking at age 19 and have been smoking

roughly 30 cigarettes each day.

Some of the survey findings were:

- 98 per cent reported symptoms of poor lung health, yet didn't link lung dysfunction with sickness;
- 63 per cent reported their chest made a wheezing or whistling sound when they had a cold; 46 per cent said wheezing routinely occurred without a cold;
- 60 per cent reported that climbing one flight of stairs left them breathless;

• 59 per cent reported having a chronic cough; and

• 50 per cent reported bringing up phlegm from their chest.

The irony is, when asked to rate their overall health, the majority (73 per cent) replied 'average' to 'excellent'.

If you would like more information on lung health, please visit The Lung Association website at www.lung.ca

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