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Addiction Keeps Wisconsin Smokers Lighting Up

According to a paper being released today by the UW Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention, the greatest barriers to quitting smoking are those resulting from the addictive nature of tobacco. In the paper, "Barriers to Quitting Smoking," based on a survey of more than 1500 smokers, enjoyment of smoking and craving for cigarettes are cited most often by smokers as reasons they continue to smoke. Other barriers include loss of stress relief, withdrawal symptoms, fear of weight gain, fear of failure and cost of medications designed to help smokers quit.

"This study shows the power of addiction to nicotine," said Dr. Michael Fiore, one of the paper's authors. "It keeps smokers hooked by providing pleasure when present and discomfort when it is withdrawn. It is a powerfully addictive drug."

This paper, part of a series based on the 2003 Wisconsin Tobacco Survey (WTS), found significant differences in quitting barriers by gender, race, age and smoking rate. Women were much more likely to list stress relief as a main barrier than men (25 percent of women vs. 16 percent of men). Women were five times more likely to see weight gain as a barrier than men. Smokers 25-64 were almost twice as likely to find weight gain a deterrent to quitting as were younger and older smokers.

In terms of racial differences, African Americans were almost half as likely to cite enjoyment of smoking as a barrier. Both Whites and African Americans reported loss of stress relief and cravings for cigarettes as significant barriers to quitting.

Cost of medications and other treatments were more likely to interfere with quitting for lower income smokers. And, only 17 percent of lower-income respondents were aware of any stop smoking programs offered by their employers compared to 30 percent of those with higher incomes.

"The data in this paper, as well as that in our previous paper on quitting, shows that smokers need help in quitting," said Fiore. "Healthcare providers, insurers and

employers need to view tobacco addiction as a disease and work with smokers to help them use effective treatments to overcome their dependence.”

Environmental factors also influence smokers. Fifty percent of all current smokers reside in households where there are other smokers. Loss of work or social relationships was a more potent barrier for younger smokers to overcome than for older smokers. Over 30 percent of smokers 18-24 thought quitting might interfere with these relationships.

The paper also showed that barriers were also somewhat dependent upon the amount of cigarettes smoked. Heavier smokers (over 21 cigarettes a day) were more concerned about withdrawal symptoms, fear of failure and weight gain than lighter smokers (5 or less). However, 64 percent of light smokers were concerned about craving and 34 percent withdrawal symptoms.

This paper is based on the 2003 Wisconsin Tobacco Survey conducted with 8111 Wisconsin residents by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center for the UW Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention and UW Comprehensive Cancer Center. The Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services funded the survey. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded the report.

Copies of the report are available online at www.ctri.wisc.edu and www.tobwis.org or can be obtained by calling 608-262-8673.

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