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Spine Experts Say, “Drop the Pack to Improve Your Back!”

To Avoid Back Pain and Failed Back Surgery, Quit Smoking As Soon as Possible

Burr Ridge, IL—On the eve of the “Great American Smokeout” and the annual New Year’s resolution season, the North American Spine Society (NASS) is giving patients another reason to quit smoking: saving their backs.

“There are many excellent health reasons to quit smoking, but many of them seem too far in the future to worry some smokers, including emphysema and cancer,” said Douglas Pahl, MD, an orthopedic surgeon from Columbus, Georgia. “But almost everyone will experience back pain in their lives, and even for younger smokers, that pain can be more excruciating than for non-smokers. It also can have more immediate negative effects on them, including their ability to hold a job or enjoy life.”

When an otherwise healthy patient complains of back pain, Dr. Pahl says he is never surprised to discover that they smoke or use e-cigarettes. “Clinical evidence shows that smokers are at higher risk for developing back pain. To reduce pain and disability, it is critically important that patients quit smoking as soon as possible.”

It is believed that nicotine, an addictive chemical found in tobacco, restricts the flow of nutrient and oxygen-rich blood to the discs that cushion the spine, which can make the spine more vulnerable to injury and premature spinal degeneration. Smoking also reduces the body’s ability to absorb calcium, which can lead to a decrease in bone density and can increase a person’s risk of osteoporosis and fractures.

“Also, the effects of smoking on the body’s ability to heal are so serious that many spine surgeons refuse to perform certain surgeries, including fusion, on patients who smoke,” added Dr. Pahl. “So, we are in a bit of a catch-22 paradox here: smoking can cause back pain, which can be fixed by back surgery, but you cannot get the back surgery you need unless you quit smoking.”

(more)
According to the American Cancer Society, nearly 38 million Americans still smoke (this includes cigarettes and e-cigarettes), and smoking remains the single largest preventable cause of death and illness in the world. Smoking causes more than 480,000 deaths every year, or about 1 in 5 deaths. More than 16 million Americans live with a smoking-related disease. While the cigarette smoking rate has dropped significantly, from 42% in 1965 to less than 15.5% in 2016, the gains have been inconsistent. Some groups of Americans suffer disproportionately from smoking-related cancer and other diseases, including those who have less education, who live below the poverty level, or who suffer from serious psychological distress, as well as certain racial and ethnic groups.

The “Great American Smokeout” is an annual intervention event on the third Thursday of November by the American Cancer Society. In 2018, it will be held on November 15.

NASS is a global multidisciplinary medical society that utilizes education, research and advocacy to foster the highest quality, ethical, value- and evidence-based spine care for patients. NASS is comprised of more than 8,000 members from several disciplines, including orthopedic surgery, neurosurgery, physiatry, neurology, radiology, anesthesiology, research and physical therapy. For more information, visit www.spine.org and find NASS on: NASS Facebook and NASS Twitter.

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