It’s Never Too Late to Quit Smoking for Good

By: Helen Marra, RRT

The American Cancer Society marks the Great American Smokeout on the third Thursday of November each year by encouraging smokers to use that date to make a plan to quit, or to plan in advance and quit smoking that day. By quitting, even for one day, smokers will be taking an important step towards a healthier life – one that can lead to reducing cancer risk. This year’s date is Thursday, November 20.

Tobacco use remains the single largest preventable cause of disease and premature death in the US, yet about 42 million Americans still smoke cigarettes — that’s almost 1 in every 5 adults. As of 2012, there were also 13.4 million cigar smokers in the US, and 2.3 million who smoke tobacco in pipes — other dangerous and addictive forms of tobacco.

Just look at these remarkable statistics to see how quickly stopping smoking can make a positive difference in your health and longevity:

- 20 minutes after quitting, your heart rate and blood pressure drop.
- 12 hours after quitting, the carbon monoxide level in your blood drops to normal.
- 2 weeks to 3 months, your circulation improves and lung function increases.
- 1 to 9 months, coughing and shortness of breath decrease, cilia start to regain normal function in the lungs, increasing the ability to handle mucus, clean the lungs, and reduce the risk of infection.
- 1 year, the excess risk of coronary heart disease is half that of a continuing smoker’s.
- 5 years, the risk of cancer of the throat, mouth, esophagus and bladder are cut in half. Cervical cancer risk falls to that of a non-smoker. Stroke risk can fall to that of a non-smoker after 2 to 5 years.
- 10 years, the risk of dying from lung cancer is about half that of a person who is still smoking. The risk of cancer of the pancreas and larynx decreases.
- 15 years, the risk of coronary heart disease is that of a non-smokers.

For smokers who can’t or won’t quit, prolonged conditions can include chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). COPD refers to a group of lung diseases that block airflow and make breathing difficult.

Emphysema and chronic bronchitis are the two most common conditions that make up COPD. Chronic bronchitis is an inflammation of the lining of your bronchial tubes, which carry air to and from your lungs. Emphysema occurs when the air sacs (alveoli) at the end of the smallest air passages (bronchioles) in the lungs are gradually destroyed. Damage to your lungs from COPD can’t be reversed, but treatment can help control symptoms and minimize further damage.

Symptoms of COPD often don’t appear until significant lung damage has occurred, and they usually worsen over time. For chronic bronchitis, the main symptom is a cough that you have at least three months a year for two consecutive years. Other signs and symptoms of COPD include:

- Shortness of breath, especially during physical activities
- Wheezing
- Chest tightness
- Having to clear your throat first thing in the morning, due to excess mucus in your lungs
- A chronic cough that produces sputum that may be clear, white, yellow or greenish
- Blueness of the lips or fingernail beds (cyanosis)
- Frequent respiratory infections
- Lack of energy
- Unintended weight loss (in later stages)

The health benefits of quitting smoking start immediately from the moment of smoking cessation. Quitting while you are younger will reduce your health risks more, but quitting at any age can give back years of life that would be lost by continuing to smoke. See your doctor if you need help quitting smoking, or if you may be experiencing symptoms of COPD.

Registered Respiratory Therapist Helen Marra is coordinator of Raritan Bay Medical Center’s Pulmonary Rehabilitation Program in Old Bridge. The outpatient program provides patients with personalized treatment plans that include self-care education, physical reconditioning and maintenance planning. If you struggle with COPD, Emphysema, Asthma or another condition that causes shortness of breath, ask your doctor if you could benefit from pulmonary rehabilitation, then call to make an appointment at 732-360-4290.