

Showdown with the Marlboro man: Teens and tobacco

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The Marlboro man is kidnapping more and more children. Each day nearly 4,800 adolescents aged 11 to 17 are accepting a cigarette from him, an increase of 70 percent in ten years. And once they've tried one, 3,000 of them become regular smokers.

Yet despite the surge in smoking, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled March 21 that tobacco is not subject to FDA regulation. Writing for the 5-4 ruling, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor explained that Congress has not given the FDA the authority it needs to regulate tobacco. Then she sounded this warning: "The FDA has amply demonstrated that tobacco use, particularly among children and adolescents, poses perhaps the single most significant threat to public health in the United States."

Even three cigarettes a day can lead to addiction—the relaxing pull of nicotine is that strong. And even if they quit smoking, says a new report, teen smokers may incur permanent DNA damage to their young lungs and raise their risk of lung cancer.

There are dozens of antismoking initiatives in place, but results are uneven and no one is sure what works. California imposes a 25 cents per pack tax and uses the \$150 million in tax revenue for its prevention program. Woodridge, Illinois, restricts young people's access to tobacco products and spot-checks stores for compliance. Smoking among 12- to 14-year-olds in that community has gone down 50 percent. However, a Massachusetts study cautions that such decreases come only with total compliance from retailers; otherwise teens find the store owners who will sell to them.

Peer pressure seems to work, with kids supporting kids who say no. In Tucson, Arizona, the Full Court Press program uses teens who speak harshly of tobacco industry lies and of the industry's efforts to snag teen smokers. Teens seem to respond when they realize that adults are "using" them. Yet despite youthful

defiance, teens also have a better chance of not smoking if no one's smoking at home.

Unfortunately, all these initiatives, as well as the tobacco industry's own antismoking advertising, are buried by the \$5.1 billion (in 1996) spent by the industry on marketing. It works. Researchers have found that young smokers have a strong sense of brand loyalty, with over 50 percent of girl and boy smokers in grades eight to 12 choosing Marlboro, followed by Newport (which invites smokers to become "alive with pleasure"). While it's hard to know how to fight this trend, we can be clear about the goal. Nine out of ten smokers start before they're 18, while almost no one starts smoking after age 21. Energy needs to be put into local initiatives and national legislation to keep cigarettes out of the hands of teenagers. Then, at 21, most of them will be able to tell the Marlboro man to leave them alone.