

What My Cancer Taught Me: Quit Smoking Before It's Too Late

The editors of *AFP* welcome submissions for Close-ups. Guidelines for contributing to this feature can be found in the Authors' Guide at <http://www.aafp.org/afp/authors>.

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I was having some nerve problems, and was going in for a nerve test. A young intern treated me, and he wanted to look inside my mouth. I was thinking, "I'm here for my nerves. I wonder why he wants to look in my mouth?" But I let him look anyway. He told me that he saw an ulcer in my mouth, and wanted me to get it checked out. They did a biopsy. I'd smoked almost 30 years, and figured I wouldn't get cancer. But guess what, I did. When they called to tell me the news, I was surprised, scared, and in a fog. Both of my brothers died from throat cancer. One died in hospice when he was only 35. The other died when he was 42. Both of them still wanted to smoke and drink, even at the end.

I made up my mind. Right then and there I quit smoking. Before my cancer diagnosis, my doctors had told me to quit. I heard them, but I didn't pay attention. I knew it was their job to tell me.

The cancer changed my life. Since I quit smoking three years ago, I think it has helped my blood pressure. Awhile back, I was diagnosed with peripheral arterial disease, but now I can walk more than 100 ft without pain, which I couldn't before. My diabetes and neuropathy seem better too. When I quit smoking I had to wash all of my clothes. I even washed the walls in my house. The odor of smoke is really bad. It's taken me a couple of years to get a smoke-free apartment. It's really peaceful, quiet, and there's no smoke around at all.

I would say to all the smokers out there, I know how good it tastes, but I also know that it could be killing you. So please try to quit. Try with all your might. You can do it. If you need help from a doctor or counselor, get it. Please don't take your life for granted. Doctors shouldn't sugarcoat the truth: smoking causes cancer. Give a message like, "We can take care of this, but you need to quit smoking."—ANNIE L. ROBINSON



COMMENTARY

When Annie came to see me after her visit with the specialist, I was as anxious as she was that the diagnosis would be cancer. I had another patient who was diagnosed with an intraoral cancer at the same time. I was so impressed that Ms. Robinson quit smoking immediately. Visit after visit, when I checked in on her, she continued to remain free of tobacco. I anticipated a relapse, like I have seen with many of my other patients who smoke. She determined that this was her decision, and has really stuck with it despite other physical and emotional challenges. I think she has much to teach others about her experience.

COLLEEN T. FOGARTY, MD, MSc

RESOURCES

For patients

American Lung Association
Web site: <http://www.lungusa.org/stop-smoking/>
Smokefree
Web site: <http://www.smokefree.gov/>
Telephone: 1-877-44U-QUIT (1-877-448-7848)

For physicians

Interventions to Facilitate Smoking Cessation
Web site: <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2006/0715/p262.html> ■