

MEDIA RELEASE

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Even light smokers have double risk of early death, Australian-first research reveals

Australian-first research to be presented today shows the damage from even light tobacco smoking is more severe – and associated with a higher risk of premature death – than previously thought.

The first ever analysis of long-term Australian smoking data has found that two-thirds of deaths in current smokers can be directly attributed to smoking – much higher than international estimates of 50%.

The four-year analysis looked at health records from more than 200,000 people participating in the Sax Institute's 45 and Up Study and found current smokers were cutting at least 10 years off their lifespan.

"We all know that smoking is bad for your health, but until now we haven't had direct large-scale evidence from Australia about just how bad it is," said study leader and Scientific Director of the 45 and Up study, Professor Emily Banks.

"We've been relying on evidence from other countries."

With Australian smoking prevalence peaking in 1945 for men and 1978 for women, Australia was now experiencing a "mature epidemic" where the full impact of smoking on health is only just being realised, Professor Banks said.

The study, supported by the National Heart Foundation of Australia in collaboration with major 45 and Up partner Cancer Council NSW, found that over the four year follow-up period, current smokers were three times more likely to die than people who had never smoked. And, according to study co-author Associate Professor Freddy Sitas from Cancer Council NSW, the risk of dying over the four years of the study increased with the number of cigarettes smoked per day.

"Even among less heavy smokers – those smoking an average of 10 cigarettes per day – the risk of death was more than doubled," Associate Professor Sitas said.

"People don't realise how damaging even light smoking is for your health – for cancer, heart disease, lung disease and a range of other conditions."

But Professor Banks said: "The good news is that stopping smoking at any age reduces the risk; the younger you are when you quit, the better".

Professors Banks and Sitas are among a group of more than 450 researchers using the 45 and Up Study to investigate a broad range of health issues from diabetes to blood pressure and will present their results today at the 10th Annual 45 and Up Collaborators' Meeting.

The meeting is a yearly event showcasing the Study's latest findings and this year marks a decade since the Study was conceived as a major research resource to tackle some of the biggest health issues facing Australians.

The 45 and Up Study is following the health and ageing of a quarter of a million Australians and is the largest ongoing study of healthy ageing in the Southern Hemisphere. As the Study gathers more information over time, it will build an important picture of how Australia is ageing to inform the community and importantly, those who design and deliver health services.

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45 and Up Study Partners:

