Late Onset Smoking among Young Adults
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This paper provides a summary on the extent and factors associated with late onset (initiation) smoking among young adults, that is, smoking behaviour that starts after age 18. It highlights some key factors associated with late initiation in this population.

Prevalence of late onset smoking
Approximately 29.8% of young adults aged 18-34 in Ontario smoke (Health Canada, 2008), representing the highest prevalence of any group and more than double that of youth. While smoking initiation usually occurs in adolescence, current research suggests that a number of young adults begin smoking after the age of 18.

According to the Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey (CTUMS) in 2008, 17.6% of young adult smokers aged 18-34 indicated that they smoked their first cigarette after the age of 18 with the latest age of initiation being 28 years for a very small percentage of this population (0.1%) (Health Canada, 2008). Furthermore, 31.1% of young adults became daily smokers after the age of 18. This is comparable to findings from Hammond (2005), who reports that in the 2003 CTUMS close to one in five 18-29 year old smokers reported having tried their first cigarette after the age of 18, as opposed to during adolescence, and the majority of young adult smokers became regular smokers after the age of 18.

For post-secondary students, the rates of late initiation appear to be similar to that of the general young adult population. Clarkin et al. (2008) report that 17.6% and 29.2% of university students (18-24 years) reported first starting and becoming regular smokers respectively at 18 years or older. Similarly, in a study of Canadian university students, Cairney & Lawrance (2002) found that 27% began to smoke after the age of 17 and 33.7% became daily smokers after the age of 18. Little evidence exists on late onset smoking among young adults without a post-secondary education (Green et al., 2007) although there is some indication that some young people start smoking when they get into the workforce (Hammond 2005).
Reasons for late initiation

Young adult smokers represent a diverse group of users and the reasons for late onset smoking are varied and include socioenvironmental influences, substance use, cost and targeted marketing. Colder et al. (2006) note that late onset smokers were typically characterized in adolescence by low exposure to role models who smoke, low levels of deviance, negative beliefs about smoking and by college attendance. For many young adults, smoking is a transitional behaviour often associated with major changes in living arrangements, which may increase susceptibility to smoking (e.g. leaving home and no longer subject to parental monitoring), social networks, and school and work settings (Hammond 2005). Staten et al. (2007) found that American students with at least one parent with a college education were at a higher risk of being late initiators compared to those whose parents had no college education. Furthermore, compared to participants who had never initiated smoking, those who started smoking after the age of 18 were more likely to participate in a social organization and less likely to participate in a service organization (Staten et al. 2007).

Alcohol use is associated with increased likelihood of smoking (Messer & Pierce, 2010b; Reed et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2010; Staten et al. 2007) although the relationship between alcohol use and late initiation is not very clear (Messer, 2007). Reed et al. (2010) however found that smoking initiation was correlated to increased drinking frequency with an initiation rate of 1% among young adults who reported never drinking in the last 12 months compared to 18.6 % and 16.4% among those who reported drinking on 20-39 and 40 or more occasions respectively. Many young adults, especially those in post-secondary settings, identify as “social smokers” and report smoking only or more frequently in social situations such as parties and when they are spending time with friends. Myers et al. (2009) found that alcohol and drug use, behavioural undercontrol (e.g. impulsivity, thrill seeking, rebelliousness, irresponsibility, nonconformity, and aggressiveness), and parental smoking predicted smoking experimentation but not established smoking. Reed et al. (2010) found that the use of drugs such as marijuana also predicts smoking among young adults with participants who used marijuana being three times more likely to report smoking their first cigarette in the past year.

Other factors that contribute to late onset smoking include the cost of cigarettes and targeted marketing of tobacco products. Zhang et al. (2006) found that cigarette price reduction was significantly associated with smoking initiation with the rate of smoking initiation among young adults increasing as the cost of cigarettes decreased – for each 1% decrease in price, initiation increased by 3.36%. Staten et al. (2007) suggest that the surprising finding that late initiators were more likely to have at least one parent with a college education might be linked to the fact that these American students have more income to spend on alcohol and cigarettes and as
such are not heavily influenced by cost. Evidence also suggests that late initiation may be coincident with an increase in tobacco industry marketing aimed at young adults (Gilpin et al., 2005; Hammond, 2005; Messer and Pierce, 2010).

The research summarized in this backgrounder suggests that while a majority of people begin smoking before 18, factors such as socioenvironmental influences, substance use, cost and marketing influence smoking initiation after the age of 18. These factors should be considered when designing prevention programs and policies to reduce smoking rates among young adults.

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References


