

# Up in Smoke: Dispelling Myths about Smoking

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with introduction from the Singapore Heart Foundation



Smoking is widely regarded as the single biggest risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Smokers are three times more likely to suffer from heart attacks than non-smokers and twice as likely to succumb to sudden cardiac death.

This is because of the harmful chemicals contained in cigarettes. Nicotine causes a rise in blood pressure, narrowing of the blood vessels, irregular heartbeats as well as spasms of the muscles in arterial walls. Similarly, the carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke damages the inner lining of the blood vessels as well as reduces the oxygen level in the blood. This irritates the blood vessel walls and may trigger the onset of atherosclerosis, a medical condition commonly referred to as the "hardening of the arteries".

As such, quitting smoking, or refraining from the first puff, will contribute significantly to the prevention of heart disease, as well as arrest the deterioration of any existing heart condition.

Despite the serious health threats of smoking, the number of people picking up the habit, especially among the young, is seemingly on the rise. Why do people smoke and why do smokers find it difficult to quit? We identify and debunk the three most common misconceptions about smoking.

## Myth 1: Smoking relieves stress.

You walk out of the building and head towards the smoking area where you and your colleagues get together for at least a couple of times every day. The day has been tough so far and you are feeling the need for the cigarette stick. But before you light up, stop and think for a moment.

Does smoking really help you to relieve your stress?

Numerous studies have shown that the stress relief you feel when you smoke is actually relief from the nicotine craving caused by your smoking habit. When you smoke, the nicotine level in your body fluctuates, dropping rapidly in between cigarettes. This level results in feelings of stress and irritability, pushing you towards the next stick to "de-stress". When you start on another cigarette, your body receives the nicotine it needs, thereby creating a perceived feeling of stress relief. This feeling of relief is often mistaken as a feeling of relaxation caused by the cigarettes.

So what can you do to relieve your stress without smoking? Other methods of stress relief, such as exercise, can alleviate your stress better and also leave you with a long lasting sense of well being and confidence. Besides, with every cigarette that you smoke to help you cope with your stress, you are increasing your risk of getting a whole host of smoking-related diseases.

5 healthier ways to de-stress:

- Take in 10 deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly. Free your mind of any thoughts and concentrate on your breathing exercise.
- Talk to a colleague and share your thoughts and feelings about the incident that causes you stress.
- Stop your chain of thoughts if they accumulate to stress you out even more.
- Drink warm camomile tea to help calm the nerves or peppermint tea to perk you up.
- If you need to, pamper yourself with a manicure or massage over lunch time.



## Myth 2: Smoking is glamorous and beautiful.

Much of this myth is the result of the multi-billion dollar marketing and advertising campaign by tobacco companies to include images of glamorous movie stars and models smoking in movies and magazines. Such scenes help tobacco firms market smoking as a beautiful and glamorous habit when in fact, smoking causes premature ageing of your skin.

Smoking results in the breakdown of collagen, a structural protein necessary to maintain skin elasticity. It also dehydrates your skin leading to sagging and wrinkled skin especially at the delicate eyes and lips area. Your skin cells are also deprived of oxygen and essential nutrients as smoking reduces oxygen levels in the blood and restricts blood flow.

Do not fall prey to the advertising gimmicks of the tobacco industry any longer. Quit smoking now to maximise your youth.

## Myth 3: "Light" cigarettes are less harmful.

Some cigarette companies offer brands in the market promoted as "safer alternatives" to regular cigarettes. These "safer alternatives" are marketed as "mild", "light" and "ultra-light" cigarettes which have filter vents to allow surrounding air to dilute the tar and nicotine concentration. Many smokers mistakenly believe these cigarettes to be less harmful.

However, there is no convincing evidence to prove that switching to these "mild", "light" and "ultra-light" cigarettes can drastically reduce the likelihood of smoking-induced diseases. Theoretically, the filter vents allow air to dilute the smoke being passed through, reducing the concentration of tar and nicotine. But behavioral models have shown that smokers unconsciously compensate for the lower nicotine levels by blocking the filter vents with their hands or mouth. Smokers also inhale more deeply when smoking low-yield cigarettes to get a nicotine high similar to that of normal-yield cigarettes.

The marketing tactics of tobacco companies just lull smokers into a false sense of security.

The best way for smokers to reduce the health risks caused by smoking is not to switch to "light" or "ultra-light" cigarettes, but rather to quit smoking entirely!

Do not fall prey to the misconceptions any longer. Quit now!

**For more information and support on quitting smoking, call  
QuitLine 1800-438-2000 or visit [www.hpb.gov.sg/Quit4life](http://www.hpb.gov.sg/Quit4life)**



# New Study Shows South Asians Vulnerable To Heart Disease Because of Faulty Gene

A study published in *Nature Genetics* and covered by the *Straits Times* earlier this year reported that tens of millions of people from the Indian subcontinent are vulnerable to cardiomyopathy (CM) – which literally means “heart muscle disease” – because of a defect in the MYBPC3 gene that provides the blueprint for a heart protein.

The new research by an international team of 25 scientists and doctors from four countries found that about 4% of the 1.5 billion people in the Indian subcontinent are carriers of this MYBPC3 mutation. Carriers of this faulty gene demonstrate an increased risk of heart failure that is exacerbated by high blood pressure, age and environmental factors.

In response to concerns by heart patients, members of the public and health professionals in Singapore, Associate Professor Terrance Chua, Chairman of the Singapore Heart Foundation (SHF) explained: “This is an interesting study that suggests that genes that cause cardiomyopathy (heart muscle disease) are relatively common, affecting up to 4% of South Asians, so one should expect to see a higher prevalence of this condition among Indians. I have not personally observed this in my patients, and further research in this area would be helpful. It is important to note that different kinds of gene mutations can also give rise to cardiomyopathy, and not all individuals with a specific gene will develop the disease that is related to it. For some people, the effect of this mutation may not manifest until later in life.”

When asked whether routine screening for this mutation would be helpful, A/Prof Chua commented that: “Screening for genes linked to cardiomyopathy is generally not yet recommended in the general population, as the tests may not detect all the possible mutations that give rise to cardiomyopathy, and not everyone with a particular gene will develop the

disease that is related to it.” Genetic tests may sometimes be helpful for screening the family members of a patient with a particular inherited disease, especially if other tests are inconclusive.

“Atherosclerotic heart disease is the most common form of heart disease in the general population in Singapore. Cardiomyopathy is far less common,” said Dr C Sivathasan, a member of the Board of the Singapore Heart Foundation.

Dr Low Lip Ping, Chairman Emeritus of SHF concurred and added that there is as yet no indication that this gene mutation has any relation to atherosclerotic disease and therefore no indication to do tests to screen for this gene mutation to assess risk of heart attack or stroke.

The Singapore Heart Foundation urges Singaporeans to take a holistic approach towards combating heart diseases by adopting a healthy lifestyle and going for regular health screenings.

