

Social networks influence smokers to quit

Most smokers quit the habit not singly but in droves, comprising spouses, friends, siblings and co-workers, thanks to the influence exerted by social networks, according to a new study

Nicholas A. Christakis of Harvard Medical School and James Fowler of the University of California based their analysis on a social network of 12,067 people who participated in a heart study.

The community-based heart study collected comprehensive measures of cardiovascular health and risk factors among three generations of participants connected as family, friends and co-workers.

The researchers analysed data collected on the network's smoking behaviour between 1971 and 2003. The group ranged between the ages of 21 and 70; individuals smoking one or more cigarettes a day were deemed smokers.

The researchers found that smoking rates among the participants reflected a declining trend of the past three decades.

In 1971, there were many more smokers and they tended to mix equally with non-smokers. But by 2000, along with a drop in smoking rates, there was also a change in their social lives.

Smokers and non-smokers tended to form separate clusters and, gradually, the smokers were marginalised on the fringes of the social network.

"This study tells us that social relationships have a critical impact on health behaviours and decisions, and that people are strongly influenced by those in their social sphere," said Richard J. Hodes of the National Institute on Aging.

The researchers found the closer the relationship between contacts, the greater the influence when one person quit smoking. For example, when a husband or wife quit, it decreased the chance of their spouse smoking by 67 percent.

When a sibling quit, it reduced the chance of smoking by 25 percent among their brothers and sisters.

The findings of the study have appeared in the latest issue of the New England Journal of Medicine.

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