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UNH Professor Finds Smokers Care Less about Health than Non-smokers

By [Erika Mantz](#)
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DURHAM, N.H. -- Long-term health effects, such as lung cancer and emphysema, could be much less of a deterrent for cigarette smokers than for non-smokers, a University of New Hampshire psychology professor discovered in her research on the value people give future consequences.

The study, published in a recent issue of the journal *Nicotine and Tobacco Research*, is the first to compare the way non-smokers, ex-smokers and current cigarette smokers value different kinds of health outcomes.

"Previous research has shown that people, as well as a variety of animal species, discount consequences that will happen later," says Amy Odum, an assistant professor of psychology at UNH and one of the authors of the study. "In other words, we tend not to weigh the future consequences of our actions as heavily as immediate consequences."

The findings show that for smokers, delayed health outcomes lost value much more quickly than for non-smokers. For both groups, delayed health outcomes did not have as big an impact as immediate ones, but smokers discounted the future health consequences even more than non-smokers. In particular, smokers are less sensitive to health losses than health gains.

"Past studies have found that cigarette smokers are impulsive with money, and these results show they are also impulsive with their health," says Odum. "This tells us that in terms of treatment we really need to focus on the immediate consequences. To be effective, therapies may best focus on future health gains such as

easier breathing and longer life, more than future health losses like lung cancer and emphysema."

To help smokers quit, Odum and her colleagues, Gregory Madden and Warren Bickel from the Human Behavioral Pharmacology Laboratory at the University of Vermont, recommend contingency management therapy, which measures the carbon monoxide levels of a smoker daily to verify how much they've smoked. If their level is down, they are given a coupon right away to buy something they want.

"We don't know why these differences between smokers and non-smokers exist," says Odum, "but hopefully future research will determine if regular smoking and nicotine addiction make people more impulsive, or if impulsive people are more likely to become smokers. Our goal was simply to find out first if there were differences."

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