

Study: Smoking raises risk of blindness

LONDON, England (Reuters) –March 5, 2004 Smokers are up to four times more likely than non-smokers to develop a disease that is the leading cause of adult blindness, public health experts said in the **British Medical Journal** on Friday.

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is an irreversible and progressive illness that robs people of their sight. Although its causes are unknown, evidence from three large studies shows smokers have a higher risk of suffering from it.

"Smokers are three to four times as likely to develop AMD," Richard Edwards, a public health expert at Manchester University, told Reuters.

In Britain an estimated one in five cases of AMD are attributable to smoking. AMD caused by smoking has impaired the sight of about 54,000 people and blinded nearly 18,000.

"This is yet another large public health problem caused by smoking. It is another reason for smokers to think about quitting," said Edwards, adding that the evidence should be used in smoking education material.

He said he suspected that the vast majority of smokers were unaware of the link between their habit and the illness.

"The fact that smokers realize they are at higher risk of going blind due to smoking could be a powerful stimulus for those attempting to stop," said Edwards.

"It is not the only incentive (to quit). There is lung cancer, heart disease, stroke etc. but this is just one more thing."

In an editorial in the journal, Edwards and his colleagues said an analysis of the studies on the link between AMD and smoking showed that quitting could help prevent or slow the development of the disease.

People with AMD who continue to smoke could be affecting their response to treatment, they said.

There is no cure for the disease, which is hereditary in some families, but laser and photodynamic therapy can have some effect.

Bright light, such as sunlight, may accelerate the progression of the illness, as may a diet high in saturated fats. People with AMD have to wear special sunglasses to protect their eyes from the sun.

"By far the main and most consistent preventable risk factor for macular degeneration is smoking," said Edwards.

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