S
moking has always been a dying habit. That isn’t news. What is news is that the industry that grew up around smoking is finally getting a taste of its own medicine, and things are starting to look terminal.

Let’s consider some recent symptoms. Just don’t get too close to the patient; he’s coughing up blood already:

- In July, 2000, a Florida jury stunned the tobacco industry with the most-costly judgment in U.S. legal history—a punitive-damages bill totalling $14.8 billion—for knowingly selling a deadly, defective product to the American public and lying about it for decades.
- In 1998, the tobacco industry voluntarily agreed to the biggest civil settlement in U.S. history, promising to pay $206 billion over 25 years for the health costs of smokers. This came in the wake of a $40 billion deal among four other states, conceding liability in the deaths and illness of millions of smokers.
- Topping off that deal, the industry even agreed to spend $1.7 billion for anti-smoking ads and to stop youth-oriented marketing, including the use of cartoon characters. (Rest in peace, Joe Camel.)
- Still, while the prognosis is bleak for smoking, long-term, in the short-term, the patient is still alive and kicking—everyone who gets in the way. Just consider:
  - 45.3 million American adults still smoke.
  - 4 of 5 smokers say they want to quit—but when they try, 80 percent light up again within a year.
  - At least 1,100 U.S. deaths a day are caused by smoking—and the rate is still climbing.

That’s why we’re inviting you to take a little time now to look closely at smoking.

We think if you really understand what happens when you smoke, you won’t find it that hard to stop.

And if you’re not already a smoker, you’ll find it a lot easier to stay that way.

When you talk tobacco, two words—tar and nicotine—scream back. They’re the best-known (and best-studied) chemicals in *Nicotiana tabacum*.

A main reason why is that there’s simply so much of them in there. Cigarette smoke contains 0.6-2.5 mg of nicotine and 5.05-35 mg of tar. Cigars contain even more—up to 120 mg of nicotine (enough to kill you, if you choked it all down at once)—while smokeless tobacco weighs in at around 6.9-14.4 mg.

But that’s not all that’s there. Tobacco also contains hundreds of other chemicals, and releases as many as 4,000 when it burns.

That might seem like enough weird chemistry experiments to satisfy most people, but cigarette companies add more—in the form of menthol and other flavorings to enhance taste and “smokeability.” Flavoring aside, the tar, nicotine, and other gunk in a cigarette race to the lungs within nanoseconds of a smoker’s first drag. There, the nicotine and other chemical byproducts (like carbon monoxide and formaldehyde) mix with oxygen, move into the bloodstream, and head straight for the brain. And it’s in the brain where things get even stickier, still.
n the brain, tobacco’s main drug effects kick in. And they all center on nicotine, tobacco’s main mood-altering chemical.

Like caffeine, nicotine is a stimulant that speeds up the flow of chemical signals in the brain. It also acts on the heart and other body systems, raising blood pressure and heart rate, reducing pain response and stress levels, and cutting appetite.

Nicotine also raises metabolism—the rate at which the body burns off energy. That’s one reason smokers tend to weigh less than non-smokers.

And just like its heavy-hitting chemical cousins, nicotine triggers a full-blown withdrawal syndrome when an addicted user stops using.

And while some of the symptoms of cold-turkey tobacco withdrawal—jangled nerves, depression, and irritability—are so common that they’re joked about, they’re not funny to many would-be ex-smokers.

Maybe that’s why, like Mark Twain, they keep giving themselves the chance to quit all over again.

He wasn’t alone. Most smokers do try to quit—usually more than once.

One reason so many fail is that smoking is a learned behavior. And external “cues”—drinking a cup of coffee, for example, or racing to meet a deadline—can trigger associations that kick off a craving for cigarettes.

But the thing that turns the craving into a compulsion is nicotine, a drug that the U.S. Surgeon General has described as addictive as heroin or cocaine.

Like those drugs, nicotine boosts mood by altering the balance of neurotransmitters in the brain that regulate attention and arousal.

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They say where there’s smoke there’s fire, and in the case of passive smoking, there’s plenty of both—and plenty of evidence to confirm some of the worst fears of nonsmokers and researchers alike.

In fact, the American Heart Association, American Lung Association, and American Cancer Society estimate that passive smoking figures into as many as 55,000 U.S. deaths each year and raises the risk of cancer and other diseases among children, co-workers, friends, and spouses of smokers.

The risk is so great, in fact, that the Environmental Protection Agency has declared sidestream smoke a “Class A” carcinogen, and backed it up with new restrictions on workplace smoking.

It isn’t just someone’s opinion any more—it’s a fact. And it’s such a big fact that not even Big Tobacco and its high-priced lawyers argue about it much any more.