



This Information Sheet discusses the similarities and differences between cigars and cigarettes, cigar smoking in New Zealand; cigar smoking and cancer risk; other health problems caused by cigar smoking and second-hand smoke; and tobacco control in New Zealand.

Key Messages

- Cigar smoking is addictive and causes cancer, such as cancers of the lung, throat, gullet and voice box.
- Cigar smoking causes other serious illnesses, for example, heart disease and serious lung diseases such as emphysema and chronic bronchitis.
- The second-hand smoke from cigars contains cancer-causing chemicals and other toxins that harm others.
- The levels of toxins and the amount of second-hand smoke from a burning cigar are worse than from a cigarette.

The similarities and differences with cigarettes

Both cigars and cigarettes contain tobacco. With a cigar, the tobacco contents are wrapped in tobacco whereas paper is used for wrapping cigarettes. The tobacco leaves used in cigars are first aged for around a year, and then fermented for up to several months. This process causes chemical and bacterial reactions that change the tobacco, and gives cigars a different smell and taste from cigarettes. Some cigars are as small as a cigarette, for example, a cigarillo while larger cigars may have as much tobacco in them as a whole pack of 20 cigarettes.

Cigar smoking in New Zealand

Cigar smoking is uncommon in New Zealand. Since 2000, the amount of cigar tobacco consumed has been declining—from 24 tonnes in 2000 to 16 tonnes in 2004.¹ However, some survey data in the late 1990s suggested a possible period of increasing cigar use among adults, Māori and young adults aged 15-24 years.²

Cigars and addiction

Nicotine is the substance in tobacco that causes addiction. Most cigars have as much nicotine as several cigarettes (with some the equivalent of a whole pack of 20).³ If cigar smokers inhale, the nicotine is absorbed as rapidly as it is with cigarettes. For those who do not inhale cigar smoke, the nicotine is absorbed more slowly through the lining of the mouth. But this will usually still cause addiction—just as people who use oral, smokeless tobacco become addicted to this form of tobacco. The American Cancer Society concludes that smoking cigars instead of cigarettes does not reduce the risk of nicotine addiction.³ The famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud was addicted to cigars and kept smoking cigars even after many operations for oral cancer.⁴

Cancer from cigar smoking

Cigar smoking increases the risk of death from lung cancer, cancer of the oral cavity (lip, tongue, mouth, and throat), cancer of the gullet (the oesophagus or the tube connecting the mouth to the stomach), and cancer of the voice box (the larynx).^{3, 5, 6, 7, 8} Cigar smoking is also linked to bladder cancer,^{7, 9} cancer of the pancreas⁷ and stomach cancer.¹⁰ As with cigarette smoking, the risks of cancer increase with the number of cigars smoked, and the risk of death approaches that of cigarette smoking at higher levels of use.³

For cigar smokers who do not inhale, the tobacco smoke does not reach their lungs in the same quantity as it does in cigarette smokers. Therefore, the risk of death from lung cancer is not as high as it is for cigarette smokers, though it is still much higher than the risk for non-smokers.⁵ However, cigar smokers who do *not* inhale have similar risks of oral and gullet cancers to cigarette smokers.⁵

The American Cancer Society reports that a new trend among cigar companies is to change the curing and fermenting process of their products to make them easier to inhale.¹¹ However, these changes also increase the levels of toxic ingredients. Therefore, this new trend is likely to increase the risk of cancer among cigar smokers.

Other health problems from cigar smoking

As with cigarette smoking, cigar smoking increases the risk of heart disease and serious lung diseases, such as emphysema and chronic bronchitis (especially for people who inhale).^{5, 6, 8, 12} Cigarette smokers who have switched to cigars or pipes continue to show increased risk of heart attacks and stroke.^{6, 8} There is also evidence that cigar smoking is linked to impotence in men (difficulty achieving an erection).¹³ As with cigarette smoking, cigar smoking has been linked to two causes of blindness: cataracts and age-related macular degeneration (a common and untreatable cause of blindness).^{14, 15} It is also linked with mouth disease, such as periodontal disease and tooth loss.¹⁶

Second-hand cigar smoke

As cigars contain more tobacco than cigarettes, and because they usually burn for much longer, they give off greater amounts of second-hand smoke than cigarettes. It can take five hours for the smoke from a single cigar burned in a home to clear.⁵ Cigar smoke contains higher concentrations of toxic and cancer-causing compounds than cigarettes.³ Some of the toxins or irritants in cigar smoke include nicotine, carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide, and ammonia.¹¹ The cancer-causing chemicals in cigar smoke include benzene, aromatic amines, vinyl chloride, ethylene oxide, arsenic, chromium, cadmium, and nitrosamines.

There are some differences between cigar and cigarette smoke due to the long aging and fermentation process used for cigars. This means that cigar tobacco has a high concentration of several tobacco-specific nitrosamines that are some of the most potent cancer-causing chemicals known. Also, because a cigar wrapper is less porous than a cigarette paper, the tobacco in a cigar doesn't burn as completely when compared with the tobacco in cigarettes. As a result, cigar smoke has higher concentrations of nitrogen oxides, ammonia, carbon monoxide and tar (all of which are harmful to health).

Tobacco control and cigar smoking

Cigar smoking in some developed countries appears to have been promoted by tobacco industry marketing that glamorises cigars. There has also been celebrity endorsements for cigar smoking, and promotion through "lifestyle" magazines that minimise the issue of harm to health.^{3, 17, 18}

In New Zealand, the law prohibits tobacco product advertising and promotion, which includes cigars. Despite this, certain cigar lifestyle magazines and columns have previously been published in New Zealand² and this has, possibly, involved breaking the law. Tobacco control activities and legislations, such as increasing taxes and restrictions on sale and promotion, should also include cigars. Such activities are very likely to decrease cigar smoking in New Zealand.

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