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U.S. smoking rate hasn't changed, CDC says

One in five Americans lights up regularly. If all states had prevention programs like those in California and Utah, 5 million fewer people would be smoking, the agency says.

By Thomas H. Maugh II, Los Angeles Times

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After 40 years of continual declines, the smoking rate in the United States has stabilized for the last five years, with one in every five Americans still lighting up regularly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Tuesday.

Moreover, more than half of all children are exposed to toxic, secondhand smoke and 98% of those who live with a smoker have measurable levels of toxic chemicals in their blood stream, setting them up for future harm from cancer, heart disease and a variety of other ailments.

"If you smoke and have children, don't kid yourself. Your smoke is harming your children," CDC Director Dr. Thomas R. Frieden said in a news conference.

Using products marketed as being less harmful is no panacea, he added. "All cigarettes kill equally, and we know that light and low-tar cigarettes are no less likely to kill you."

Despite the reduction in smoking over the last four decades, Frieden said, smoking remains the No. 1 cause of preventable deaths in the United States. Every year, an estimated 446,000 Americans die from smoking-related diseases.

The good news is that some states are making progress in combating smoking. Utah has the lowest smoking rate at 10%, and California is second with a rate just below 13%, according to CDC figures. Since 1986, adult smoking in California has dropped by about 40% and, as a result, lung cancer rates in the state have been declining four times faster than in the rest of the country.

In contrast, Kentucky and West Virginia have the highest smoking rates, with about 26% of adults lighting up regularly.

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If all the states had cancer prevention programs like those in California and Utah, Frieden said, 5 million fewer people would be smoking. Currently, about \$25 billion is available to states from cigarette taxes, but only \$700 million of that is spent on smoking prevention.

Another reason for the recent lack of success in getting fewer people to smoke is that the tobacco industry has gotten better at sidestepping government efforts to minimize smoking, Frieden said. Among their activities, he said, are targeting price discounts at children to get them to start smoking and finding new ways to promote products, such as introducing flavored lozenges to get around the ban on flavored cigarettes.

According to the study, published in the CDC's [Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report](#), about 20.9% of adults smoked in 2005 and 20.6% in 2009. In 1997, about 36% of high school students smoked. That proportion dropped to 22% by 2003, but has since declined more slowly, to 20% in 2009.

Smoking is related to sex, educational levels and race. The study found that:

- 24% of men smoke, compared with 18% of women.
- Nearly half of those with a GED and a quarter of those with no high school diploma smoke, compared with only 6% of those with a college graduate degree.
- About 31% of those who smoke live below the poverty level.
- Nearly 30% of multiracial adults and 23% of American Indian and Alaska Natives smoke.

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