

Smoking Risk Factors and Patterns among U.S. Service Members and Veterans

A summary of smoking-related research by the Millennium Cohort Study

OVERVIEW

Smoking claims the lives of over 400,000 Americans annually and is the leading preventable cause of death in the U.S. In comparison to the general population, smoking rates are notably higher among service members; as military service comes with its own set of challenging stressors, smoking can be a common and unhealthy way of coping. Service members who smoke tend to have lower fitness levels and are at greater risk for physical injury. This research explored various aspects of smoking within the military to understand and address the issues of smoking in the military to protect the health and well-being of our military community.

Key Findings

- Those who deployed and experienced combat were 63% more likely to start smoking among never-smokers and 27% more likely to resume smoking among past smokers when compared to those who did not experience combat.¹
- Smokeless tobacco (vaping) use is linked to deployment, combat experience, smoking, and certain mental health symptoms.²
- Having certain PTSD symptoms, like irritability and feeling a shortened future, increase the chance of starting to smoke.⁴
- Transitioning out of service, high alcohol use, and certain mental health conditions increase the risk of smoking.⁶

Impact

- In this research, physical exercise and interest-stimulating activities were highlighted as potential strategies to reduce cigarette cravings and prevent relapse.¹
- One study indicated deployment with combat experience made beginning to smoke or resume smoking more likely. Existing mental health disorders and life stressors were also associated with starting to smoke and resuming smoking.³
- One study showed that veterans were 20% less likely to be a smoker than service members. However, service members transitioning out of the military may have an increased risk of smoking prior to their separation date (as early as 2 years before their separation date).⁶

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this research provide important information about the complex relationship between military experiences and smoking behavior, indicating a need for targeted interventions and a deeper understanding of the issues influencing smoking habits among military service members.

- The transition period from military to veteran status is a critical time to address quitting smoking as there is a higher risk of smoking during this period.
- Approaches that focus on both mental health and quitting smoking should be developed to support service members.
- Efforts to prevent smoking and backsliding should be stressed during and after deployments to support the overall well-being of service members.

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