

Highlights in Tobacco Control: Practical Ideas Online

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SPECIAL BULLETIN ON TOBACCO AND NATURAL DISASTERS

In the chaos following the hurricanes that hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, perhaps the last thing on anyone's mind is tobacco use. After addressing basic survival needs, public health workers' focus turns to individual and community recovery – including tobacco control.

Following a natural disaster, two of the most common behavioral problems that can arise are depressive symptoms and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)¹. After a Midwest flood in 1993, 22% of those surveyed reported flood-related PTSD and 20% were diagnosed with major depression. Following Hurricane Andrew, rates of PTSD were 30%². Both depressive symptoms and PTSD can last months after life has returned to “normal,” especially in the face of property loss, physical injury, or fear of death².

Many people try to cope with emotional trauma resulting from an unexpected disaster by relying on unhealthy substances such as alcohol, drugs or tobacco³. Both PTSD and depressive symptoms are linked with increased tobacco use. Following a disaster, smoking rates increase not only among current smokers³, but also among nonsmokers⁴. People turn to tobacco to help them get through this difficult time⁵.

We do not have to accept this rise in the use of tobacco - our nation's number one killer. The good news is that some people use this opportunity to change their lives and quit smoking. This is a good time to encourage those who are ready to quit to view this new chapter in their lives as a clean slate for their health. We must take action by endorsing healthy alternatives to smoking, increasing awareness about smoking cessation aids such as the ACS Quitline and free NRT available in Jefferson County, and continuing work with the smoking cessation programs already initiated in the area.

Tips to help people stay away from tobacco use during this transition:

- o Realize that stress and negative feelings are very common after such a big upheaval, and they won't necessarily go away quickly on their own. Don't be afraid to talk about your experience with the hurricane, and don't blame others for feeling that way.
- o Use quitter's aids like the patch, nicotine gum or others.
- o Set a quit date and stick to it.
- o Use your support network of family and friends; find a quitting “buddy.”
- o Find ways to deal with the stress and cravings, like exercise or a hobby.
- o Identify the habits associated with your tobacco use and replace them with something new; if you usually smoke right after a meal, plan to go on a walk right after the meal instead.
- o Call the American Cancer Society's toll-free Quitline at 1-877-YES-QUIT (1-877-937-7848). Their trained counselors will work with you for free to help you find the right way to make this quit attempt your last one.



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