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State cuts sharply number of adults who smoke

Now 5th lowest rate in the U.S.

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By **SUSAN PHINNEY**
P-I REPORTER

The number of adult smokers in Washington declined by 21 percent since 2000, meaning there are 205,000 fewer smokers in the state, according to the state Department of Health.

The state now has the fifth-lowest smoking rate in the nation, compared with the 20th-lowest in 2000, Health Secretary Mary Selecky said at a news conference Thursday.

That still leaves us with about 790,000 adult smokers. Add the 73,000 under-18-year-olds who weren't included in the statistics, and smoking may be down, but not out, in this corner of the Pacific Northwest.

Fifth place doesn't generate a ribbon of any color at most fairs, but it's a major milestone for the state. Utah is in first place with only 13 percent of adults who smoke. California is second, Connecticut third and Hawaii fourth.

Selecky credited the Tobacco Quit Line (877-270-STOP), activated in November 2000, for aiding the decline. To date, the line has received 80,000 calls for help. But there's still room for improvement.

Dr. Hugh Maloney, president-elect of the Washington State Medical Association and a practicing physician, said he never misses an opportunity to tell people to quit. "You need to say publicly 'I'm going to quit.' "

He recommended cleaning draperies, carpets and getting the car detailed to get smoke out of your life. "Behavior modification is key," he said. A walk after dinner could replace a post-dinner smoke, for example.



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Tony Lyons, 21, of Seattle has a cigarette outside Ozzie's on lower Queen Anne Hill, where he works as a bouncer. Lyons says most of the people he is around at Ozzie's and at the car dealership where he also works smoke. He has smoked since he was 13 and says he is not ready to quit yet. So he was surprised to hear that the number of adult smokers in Washington has declined by 21 percent since 2000, meaning there are 205,000 fewer smokers in the state these days.

Trying to quit and failing isn't a disaster. It is, in fact, a good sign. According to Selecky, it takes an average of seven attempts to finally quit smoking.

The quit-smoking messages are out there, but they're not getting to all smokers. Tony Lyons, 21, a smoker for eight years, is a pack-a-day man who had never heard of the Quit Line. He said his physical health may force him to quit. Someday.

Ten percent of pregnant women in Washington still smoke, as do large numbers of Native Americans and African Americans. The state plans to continue its campaign.

"We want a healthier Washington state," Selecky said.

Several "Quit Coaches" from the Tobacco Quit Line were on hand to answer questions and pass along tips for those trying to break the habit.

Donna Manders said that when she hears callers say they tried to quit, but couldn't, she reminds them that babies stand up and fall down frequently when they're beginning to walk. Eventually, they take off running.

Others say they're afraid to quit. Manders said people can't imagine life without the support of cigarettes and the nicotine highs. But fear is part of any change.

"People discover thinking about it (quitting smoking) creates fear. Once they do it, fear evaporates," Manders said.

Coach Donn Taylor-Hill said people usually realize they're more afraid of continuing to smoke than they are of quitting. He sees it as his job to help them weigh the pros and cons.

Quit coaches don't make judgment calls, and they all have at least 90 hours of training before they start answering phones. They also tend to have college degrees in social work, counseling or other fields.

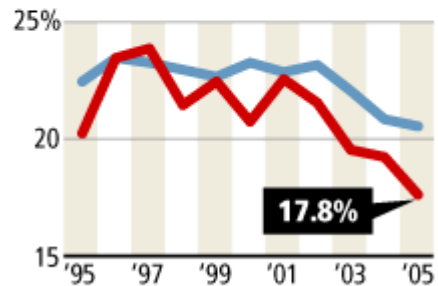
"You don't find any quit coaches with deep backgrounds in fast foods," Taylor-Hill quipped.

Leaving cigarettes behind is a complex process because it involves a physical addiction, an emotional/psychological component, and it's part of a routine.

FEWER SMOKERS

Gov. Chris Gregoire announced Wednesday that the adult smoking rate in Washington has dropped to 17.8 percent, the fifth-lowest rate in the country.

ADULT SMOKING RATE



Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Washington State Health Department

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"You have to attack all three," Manders said.

Nicotine patches can double the chances of success, but they're not a magic wand.

"You still have to deal with the emotional and behavioral factors," she added.

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