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Cigarette smoking overview

When United States Surgeon General Luther Terry proclaimed in 1964 that smoking was linked to lung cancer, tobacco companies and many smokers were quick to argue that the case was unproven. This argument and the argument that secondhand smoking is not harmful have all but disappeared in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. However, the debate surrounding restrictions on smoking continues.

One of the debated issues is smoking bans. As more and more municipalities enact bans on smoking in public spaces, outraged critics contend that such bans violate civil rights. While the critics are largely smokers, some nonsmokers also support this argument. Owners of bars and restaurants charge that the municipalities are destroying their livelihood and that people always have the choice of not patronizing establishments where smoking is allowed. Proponents of bans, on the other hand, maintain that public health considerations override personal freedoms and that smoking bans have not harmed businesses. Whichever position there is undeniable evidence that secondhand smoking leads to a myriad of costs that affect economics, productivity, and health.

In addition, tobacco companies have been accused of adding ammonia to cigarettes and of increasing the amount of nicotine in cigarettes to increase their addictiveness. They have also been accused of targeting children and adolescents with tobacco advertising. The companies vigorously deny any wrongdoing. As a result of such accusations, the attorney generals of many US states sued major tobacco companies in the late 1990s to recover money spent on state Medicaid claims in treating tobacco-related cancers, respiratory illnesses, and other tobacco-related illnesses. The manufacturers eventually negotiated a settlement, known as the Master Settlement Agreement.

Individuals have also sued, seldom successfully, charging that the tobacco companies conspired to deliberately addict them to cigarettes. Again, smokers and some nonsmokers maintain that smoking is a personal choice and that people should take responsibility for their own actions instead of blaming the tobacco companies.

Tobacco-growing states have also weighed in on the debate. Tobacco is one of the largest cash crops in the United States, although US tobacco production has declined significantly since the 1950s. Nevertheless, in 2007, China, Brazil, India, and the United States grew two-thirds of the world's tobacco. Politicians from tobacco states have traditionally formed a powerful coalition to protect the income generated by tobacco production. There is undoubtedly a tension between the health care community, the economy, and the government in weighing the costs and benefits of tobacco production.
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