



TOBACCO USE AND THE MILITARY

Tobacco is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, killing more than 490,000 Americans every year.¹ Tobacco use takes an enormous toll on the health and physical fitness of active duty U.S. military personnel and veterans because this population smokes at dramatically higher rates than the rest of the U.S. population. Tobacco use adversely affects military readiness, the health of both smokers and non-smokers, and is a financial burden on the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare systems. In a letter to all servicemembers, the surgeons general of the Air Force, Army, Navy, and the United States stated that:

"Tobacco product use is a threat to the health and fitness of our forces and compromises readiness, the foundation of a strong national defense."²

A large number of smokers in the military want to quit, but unfortunately, because of the addictive power of nicotine, most smokers fail when they try to quit smoking on their own. Although the DoD offered some cessation benefits in the past, options were limited, underutilized, and unfamiliar to many military personnel. In 2013 as part of efforts to reduce tobacco use in the military, the DoD issued rules to expand smoking cessation coverage for military personnel.³

Tobacco Use Among Active Duty U.S. Military

Tobacco use is consistently higher among active duty U.S. military than the general population. In 2018, 37.8% of active service members reported currently using tobacco in some form,⁴ compared to 19.7%⁵ of the overall US population at that time. Cigarettes are the most commonly used tobacco product among service members, with 18.4% reporting current cigarette smoking, followed by 16.2% reporting e-cigarette use, 13.4% reporting smokeless tobacco use and 10.0% reporting cigar smoking.⁶

While smoking among all active duty service personnel is down significantly from levels that exceeded 50 percent in 1980, smoking rates still far exceed that of the overall US population (13.7% in 2018).⁷ Smoking rates vary significantly by service branch. In 2018, the U.S. Marine Corps had the highest rate of smoking at 27.7%, followed by the Navy (20.4%), the Army (18.0%), the Coast Guard (14.0%) and the Air Force (11.9%). Current cigarette smoking among active duty personnel is also more common for men than women (19.5% vs. 12.8%). Junior enlisted service members had significantly higher rates of current cigarette smoking, with 23.2% of E1-E4 service members and 20.5% of E5-E6 reporting current smoking.⁸

Similar to cigarette use, rates of smokeless tobacco use are highest in the Marine Corps (19.8%), followed by the Army (14.7%), Navy (12.8%), Coast Guard (11.8%) and Air Force (8.6%). Smokeless tobacco use is also much more common among men than women (15.7% vs. 2.0%).⁹ In 2018, only 2.4% of the overall US population reported smokeless tobacco use.¹⁰

Studies have found that tobacco use is higher among service members who were more likely to be exposed to combat, enlisted (versus officers), and those who have deployed a greater number of times.¹¹

The Health Consequences of Tobacco Use Among Our Troops

While tobacco use takes an enormous toll on all users, it has particularly detrimental consequences for active duty military personnel. Tobacco use reduces soldiers' physical fitness and endurance and is linked to higher rates of absenteeism and lost productivity. In addition, service members who use tobacco are more likely to drop out of basic training, sustain injuries and have poor vision, all of which compromise troop readiness.¹²

Tobacco Use Costs to the U.S. Military

Tobacco use also places a significant burden on the DoD and VA healthcare systems. In 2008, the DoD assistant secretary for health affairs stated, “Every year, tobacco use leads to unnecessary compromises in the readiness of our troops and costs the DoD millions of dollars in preventable health care costs.” In fact, in 2014, the Department of Defense spent nearly \$1.8 billion in medical and non-medical costs related to tobacco use.¹³

Tobacco Use Among U.S. Military Veterans

According to a 2023 survey of VA enrollees’ health, 42.6% of veterans enrolled in the Veterans Administration (VA) health care system are former smokers and 11.4% are current smokers, a decrease from 14.6% in 2019. Among current smokers, certain demographic groups had higher rates of smoking, including those aged 45-64, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black non-Hispanic, and the uninsured and unemployed.¹⁴

Smoking among veterans are costing the VA healthcare system billions of dollars every year, as lifetime healthcare costs for smokers are on average \$16,000 higher compared to nonsmokers.¹⁵ During 2010, Veterans Health Administration spent an estimated \$2.7 billion on smoking-related ambulatory care, prescription drugs, hospitalizations, and home health care.¹⁶ Researchers project that in 2024, 9.0% (548,000) of VA patients will have COPD, 61.6% (3,738,000) will have hypertension, and 14.8% (897,000) will have ischemic heart disease.¹⁷ According to a 2024 report, “Differences in adult smoking behaviors are estimated to account for 20 percent to 25 percent of the differences in respiratory health outcomes between veterans and civilians.”¹⁸

Tobacco Industry Targeting of Military Personnel

The tobacco industry has a long history of targeting military personnel. Until 1975, cigarettes were provided in basic field rations.¹⁹ The tobacco industry has also targeted service members and veterans with tobacco advertising, particularly for smokeless tobacco in various men’s magazines²⁰ as well as the *Military Times* magazine, framing smokeless tobacco use as an escape from the stresses of the military.²¹

Cigarettes were also traditionally sold at deeply discounted prices in military commissaries. The DoD has taken action in recent decades to reduce these price disparities. In 2005, the DoD issued Instruction 1330.09, which requires that “Prices of tobacco products sold in military resale outlets in the United States, its territories and possessions, shall be no higher than the most competitive commercial price in the local community and no lower than 5 percent below the most competitive commercial price in the local community.”²² A 2016 DoD policy memo clarified that prices must match community prices, including all applicable taxes, but the policy may present enforcement challenges.^{23,24} Several studies find noncompliance with these policies, with cigarette prices consistently lower at military exchanges than community retailers:

- 2016 and 2019 studies found that cigarettes and smokeless tobacco were cheaper on Air Force bases than nearby off-base retailers.²⁵
- A 2014 study found that only 4.6% of military exchanges were compliance with the DoD’s Instruction. On average, cigarette prices on military exchanges were nearly 13% lower than the nearest Walmart.²⁶
- A 2011 study found that prices for Newport menthol cigarettes were between 18.1% and 16.7% lower at military exchanges compared to the nearest Walmart.²⁷

Pricing strategies such as these contradict the DoD’s goals to “communicate to service members that tobacco use is detrimental to health and readiness.”²⁸ Instead, deep discounts on tobacco products encourage service members to start using tobacco. Interviews with military leaders and junior enlisted military personnel reveal that easy access to cheap cigarettes on military installations is viewed as one way the military promotes a culture where tobacco use is accepted.²⁹ Older studies have found that 36 to

40 percent started smoking after joining the military.³⁰ Price discounts also discourage quitting. In 2011, nearly one-quarter (24.5%) of light/moderate smokers and 15.5 percent of heavy smokers in the military reported that increasing cigarette prices to match those outside the installation would deter their cigarette smoking.³¹

Eliminating discounts for tobacco products on military installations would discourage initiation among service members, encourage current users to quit, and strengthen the military's tobacco control efforts.

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- ⁴ RAND, 2018 Department of Defense Health Related Behaviors Survey (HRBS): Results for the Active Component, April 28, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4222.html.
- ⁵ Creamer MR, et al., "Tobacco Product Use and Cessation Indicators Among Adults — United States, 2018." *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2019;68:1013–1019. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6845a2.htm?s_cid=mm6845a2_w.
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- ¹² Institute of Medicine, *Combating Tobacco in Military and Veteran Populations*, 2009.
- ¹³ CDC Office on Smoking and Health, Military Service Members and Veterans, <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/groups/military.html#five>. See also, Lewin Group. Cost of Tobacco Use & Exposure, Overweight and Obesity, and High Alcohol Consumption within the TRICARE Prime and Standard Population: Technical Report., 2016.
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