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Old Hollywood is replete with images of men who smoked cigarettes â€” from rough-and-tumble cowboys like John Wayne to debonaire leading men like Humphrey Bogart. And famous women were known for smoking, too: Many images of stars like Marlene Dietrich feature a glamorous woman elegantly posing with a cigarette in hand.

Smoking used to be considered more of a male pursuit, with much higher numbers of men smoking than women. Back in 1965, about 52 percent of men smoked, compared with 34 percent of women. Forty years later, 24 percent of men smoked compared with 18 percent of women. Though the overall percentage of people who smoke has come down, the smoking "gender gap" has narrowed over time, putting both sexes at more equal risk of the dangers of smoking.

Gender Differences in Smoking

Smoking is a very different experience for men and women, research has found. Men and women differ on:

Why they smoke

How they feel about the dangers of smoking

What addicts them to smoking

Why they may or may not quit

Some of the specific differences found between male and female smokers include:

Reasons for smoking. Studies have found that men smoke to feel more alert and vigorous, enjoying the positive feelings associated with the habit. Women smoke because they find it relaxes them and relieves stress. Nicotine appears to promote aggression in men, but has a calming effect on women. Women also appear to be more likely to take up smoking to help control their weight.

Enjoyment of smoking. Women appear to smoke less for the nicotine and more for other factors, such as enjoying the sight and smell of tobacco smoke or the pleasure involved in interacting with other people while smoking. For example, men on cigarette breaks tend to smoke alone, while women taking smoke breaks gather in groups.

Intensity of smoking. Men tend to consume more cigarettes than women. About 15 percent of male smokers have more than 24 cigarettes a day, compared to just 8 percent of female smokers. Women overall smoke fewer cigarettes per day than men and are less likely to inhale deeply when they smoke.

Health concerns. While many of the dangers of smoking cross gender lines, men and women smokers do face some unique risks. Male smokers may experience a decline in sexual potency and fertility. Female smokers have an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, particularly if they are taking oral contraceptives, and they also risk early menopause, cervical cancer, bone fractures, and reproductive difficulties.

Gender Differences in the Ability to Quit Smoking

Overall, women may find it much harder to stop smoking than men do. Both genders cite health concerns regarding the dangers of smoking as the top reason for quitting smoking, but the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that while 29 percent of male smokers have been able to quit, only 19 percent of female smokers have permanently broken the habit. Women are three times more likely than men to relapse while trying to quit smoking without any help.

Researchers have found a number of reasons why it's harder for women to stop smoking. Women tend to suffer withdrawal more intensely than men, especially during the last two weeks of their menstrual cycles. They may find nicotine replacement therapies like nicotine patches and nicotine gum to be less helpful than men do, and tend to worry more about weight gain if they stop smoking. Women are also more likely to relapse under stress.

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[Seoforyou1](#) - About Author:

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