

Smoking Definitions

One of the difficulties encountered in identifying smokers by self report is that there are many different ideas of what constitutes smoking behavior. For example, when asked about their smoking status, light or intermittent smokers will often classify themselves as nonsmokers. In order to maintain consistency in the use of various terms while gathering data on smoking behavior, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have developed and updated the following definitions: (1)

- Never Smokers – Adults who have never smoked a cigarette or who smoked fewer than 100 cigarettes in their entire lifetime.
- Former Smokers – Adults who have smoked at least 100 cigarettes in their lifetime, but say they currently do not smoke.
- Nonsmokers – Adults who currently do not smoke cigarettes, including both former smokers and never smokers.
- Current Smokers – Adults who have smoked 100 cigarettes in their lifetime and currently smoke cigarettes every day (daily) or some days (nondaily).

Other terms not defined by the CDC are also frequently used:

- Light Smoker – There is no consensus on a definition for light smoking. Various criteria used have included < 1 pack per day, < 15 cigarettes per day, < 10 cigarettes per day, and 1-39 cigarettes per week. Light smokers include low-rate daily smokers (< 5 cigarettes per day) and “chippers” who consistently smoke ≤ 5 cigarettes per day on the days when they do smoke. (2)
- Intermittent Smoker – A broad term that covers a variety of patterns of tobacco use but is generally defined as smoking on a nondaily basis. Social smokers, who limit smoking to contexts such as parties, bars, or nightclubs, often fit into this category. Intermittent smoking is also common among younger smokers and minority populations. (2)

References

1. US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010). Health behaviors of adults: United States, 2005-2007. *Vital and Health Statistics*, Series 10, Number 245, Appendix II, p. 80.
2. Schane, R.E, Ling, P.M., & Glantz, S.A. (2010). Health effects of light and intermittent smoking: A review. *Circulation*, 121(13), 1518-22.