

The impact smoking has on your organs and medical aid cover - Medshield

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According to the [South Africa Global Adult Tobacco Survey \(GATS\) 2021](#), 29.4% of adult South Africans (age 15+) are current tobacco users, including 41.7% of men and 17.9% of women. Alarming, 21.5% of children aged 13-15 are current tobacco users (boys 24.3%; girls 19.0%) who smoke cigarettes and other tobacco products.



But smoking is a habit that affects nearly every aspect of your health, from your physical appearance to your internal organs and can lead to chronic health conditions. Smoking is a leading cause of preventable death worldwide and can significantly impact your medical aid cover.

The impact of smoking on organs

One of the primary effects of smoking is damage to your **respiratory system**. Smoking causes irritation and inflammation of the lining of your airways, leading to chronic bronchitis and emphysema. These conditions cause coughing, shortness of breath, and difficulty breathing and can permanently damage your lungs. In addition to the direct damage to your lungs, smoking also increases your risk of developing lung cancer.

Smoking can also have a significant impact on your **cardiovascular system**. The chemicals in tobacco smoke cause damage to your blood vessels, leading to an increased risk of heart disease and stroke. It increases your blood pressure and heart rate, making your heart work harder to pump blood through your body. It can damage your heart and blood vessels and increase your risk of developing atherosclerosis, a condition in which fatty deposits build up in your arteries and restrict blood flow.

Your **digestive system** can also be affected. Smoking increases your risk of developing a range of digestive disorders, including peptic ulcers, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), and colon cancer. Smoking can also interfere with the absorption of nutrients in your digestive system, leading to malnutrition.

For women, smoking can lead to **decreased fertility** and an increased risk of pregnancy complications, including miscarriage, premature birth, and low birth weight. Smoking during pregnancy can also lead to long-term health problems for the child, including an increased risk of asthma, respiratory infections, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). For men, smoking can also have an impact on reproductive health. Smoking decreases sperm count and motility and leads to erectile dysfunction. Smoking can also increase the risk of developing testicular cancer.

Smoking significantly impacts your overall health and well-being by increasing your risk of developing various chronic conditions, including diabetes, osteoporosis, and rheumatoid arthritis. It can also worsen asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

How it affects medical aid cover

Medical aid schemes in South Africa generally cover smoking-related illnesses and diseases, but they may have specific limitations and exclusions related to smoking. Most will cover treating smoking-related conditions, such as lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and heart disease, under their prescribed minimum benefits (PMBs). PMBs are a set of defined benefits that medical schemes are required to cover for all their members. PMBs include diagnosing, treating, and caring for any emergency medical condition and 27 chronic diseases, including some smoking-related illnesses. It is essential to read your medical scheme's terms and conditions carefully and seek support from healthcare professionals to quit smoking and improve your health.

Quick facts

- Over 39,000 South Africans die from tobacco-related diseases each year.
- Tobacco causes about 10% of male deaths, and 5% of female deaths (7.5% overall)
- Over 13% of non-communicable disease-related deaths (ex: ischemic heart disease, stroke, diabetes, COPD, lung cancer, etc.) in South Africa are attributable to tobacco use.
- 11.2% of adults (age 15+) who work indoors are exposed to secondhand smoke in enclosed workplaces, 10.8% in restaurants, and 18.0% inside their homes.
- 39.3% of youth (ages 13–15) in South Africa are around others who smoke in places outside their home, and 29.0% are exposed at home.

Source: <https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/problem/toll-global/africa/south-africa>

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