

Teens finally get it: Smoking is not cool

StatsCan survey shows dramatic drop Fewer teens lighting up in the first place

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Ryan Chang never met his grandfather.

A smoking-related disease saw to that before Chang was even born. That's why the 16-year-old Brampton native says he's never taken a drag, never even touched a cigarette and speaks emphatically about the ills of tobacco.

Chang isn't the only teen who's opted to keep his lungs smoke-free. According to a nationwide survey released by Statistics Canada this week, the smoking rate among those aged 12 to 17 has dropped in the past five years because more and more kids never light up in the first place.

Last year, 82 per cent of the 12,000 youths surveyed nationally said they'd never smoked, up from 73 per cent in 2000-2001. Smoking rates might continue to drop as the non-smokers age, since people generally start smoking before their 18th

birthday, said Margot Shields, the survey's author.

"Hopefully, in the years to come, we'll see lower rates among young adults as the youth of today move into their 20s," Shields told the *Star*.

By and large, Chang says, smoking at school is no longer an all-access pass into the upper echelon of cool.

"People just aren't really getting into it," he said.

But smoke is getting into them. The survey found the same age group that's butting out the most is also most at risk from second-hand smoke. Almost half of the 12- to 17-year-old non-smokers surveyed reported regularly inhaling second-hand smoke in 2005.

Shields says that's partially because young people are more likely to live with a smoker, be it a parent or a roommate. And since youth generally have less say in the smoking habits of their housemates, they're often forced to breathe in second-



JIM WILKES/TORONTO STAR

Ryan Chang, 16, is an anti-smoking activist who attends Turner Fenton Secondary School in Brampton. He's part of a group called Extinguish, which lobbies against smoking in Peel Region.

hand smoke.

"It would be difficult for a youth living in a household where a parent smoked to say, 'No, you can't do that,'" Shields said.

The survey also found second-

hand smoke exposure was highest in public places. The provincial smoking ban that came into effect at the end of May will likely change that in Ontario. That piece of legislation bans smoking in most indoor public

places, including designated smoking rooms and roofed-in patios at bars and restaurants.

Jim Watson, Ontario's health promotion minister, says the smoking ban has had "some impact" on the decline in new smokers, but adds a more likely explanation is a growing awareness among teens about the health risks of smoking.

"A lot more teenagers are realizing it's not cool to smoke," Watson said. "We're getting a lot more young people who are turning into great advocates for the anti-tobacco movement."

Advocates like Chang.

The Grade 11 student from Turner Fenton Secondary School is part of an anti-smoking group called Extinguish, which lobbies against smoking in Peel Region.

Sitting in the reception area of the Peel Region health centre, Chang rhymes off a list of his past anti-smoking initiatives, such as the campaign he started in his school in Grade 8 after attending a workshop presented by the Region of Peel.

Then, in his first year of high school, when many kids take a

drag for the first time, Chang and 20 others raised \$1,000 for the Canadian Cancer Society. Staff and students at Chang's Brampton high school shaved their heads for cash and donated it to make wigs for cancer patients.

Chang's drive hasn't gone unnoticed. Last month, he was presented with the Heather Crowe award during a Brampton city council meeting.

Crowe was an anti-tobacco crusader who died in May of lung cancer from second-hand smoke, despite never smoking a day in her life.

Many knew her from television ads, where she spoke about getting cancer after working as a waitress in smoke-filled restaurants for four decades.

Like Crowe, Chang says he hopes he can raise further awareness about the danger of smoking.

"What drives me is the fact that I like to let people know about the different things out there," he said. "I just have that passion to work with people. It feels good at the end of the day to know you've helped someone."