

Will graphic images spur smokers to quit? FDA unveils 9 new cigarette warnings.

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Delray Beach cardiologist Dr. Richard Kim recalls having a patient wake from heart bypass surgery only to ask within minutes for a cigarette. As an intern, he watched nicotine addicts desperate enough to smoke by inhaling through their tracheotomies.

Will the nine new warning labels unveiled Tuesday by U.S. health officials curb the nation's deadliest habit by swathing cigarette packs and advertisements in these sometimes grisly, surely disturbing, pictures and graphics?

"I'm a little skeptical about how effective it's going to be," Kim admitted. But then added, "Even if it's only 5 percent effective. With the numbers we're talking, it's still significant."

The numbers we're talking about: 46.6 million American smokers; 443,000 deaths a year related to cigarette smoking; \$200 billion a year in health costs and lost wages.

The United States was the first nation to require cigarette packs come with health warnings, but those few words that were revolutionary in 1965, and last updated in 1984, are way too tame to knock down numbers that haven't budged since 2004.

While Kim is lukewarm at the prospects of this new tactic, health officials both locally and around the world say it has worked in places such as Canada and the United Kingdom.

Smokers may wearily agree that tobacco use is bad for their health, but numerous studies indicate significant gaps in their knowledge about what exactly the health risks are.

In recent years, 35 countries have used bigger, more graphic warnings to better convey that message. And groups like the World Health Organization point to a pile of studies that say those super-size warnings work.

For example, in Brazil, where bigger warning labels were adopted in 2004, 54 percent of smokers said they had changed their opinion on the health consequences of smoking, and 67 percent said the new warnings made them want to quit.

On Tuesday, Janiece Davis was giddy as a school girl after getting a glimpse of what is due to adorn half the front and back of all cigarette packs by September 2012.

"The most appealing to me is the baby and mother with smoke swirling around," Davis said of the new labeling from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "The autopsy is another one."

By appealing, Davis of course means the most revolting. She is excited because it's her job at the Palm Beach County Health Department to curb tobacco use. She advises governments on policies. She also peddles anti-smoking messages to teens at 19 local middle and high schools.

Until now, Davis said the most effective tool in averting teens from smoking has been to reveal how tobacco companies try to lure them into smoking with lies, as in Florida's original counter-marketing "the truth" campaign.

"When you talk to them about health, a lot of youths think, 'It won't happen to me.' That's too far down the line for them," Davis said. "But this might be a deterrent.

"Youths are very visual, and if they were to see the impact that smoking has, see what lung cancer makes you look like, it can be motivating," she said. "They do like the gross pictures."

The share of Americans who smoke fell dramatically for decades following the first warning labels, dropping from nearly 40 percent to closer to 20 percent. But that decline stalled, hardly moving since about 2004.

It's unclear why. Davis and others point to cuts in programs that discouraged smoking or helped people quit.

Health officials are looking to these new, graphic labels to restart the decline.

The labels must occupy the top half of both the front and back of a pack of cigarettes, and 20 percent of an ad. Also, the pictures are accompanied by short messages such as "Cigarettes are addictive" and "Tobacco smoke causes fatal lung disease in nonsmokers." They also include a number to call for help, 1-800-QUIT NOW.

The FDA figures that pack-a-day smokers will be confronted with the graphic warnings more than 7,000 times a year.

That is, if the new warnings survive legal challenges.

Tobacco companies, which would pay for the labels, have a pending federal lawsuit that argues the labels make it "difficult, if not impossible, to see" their brand names. They have also questioned the constitutionality of dictating what is said on a product's label.

The FDA estimates the new labels will cut the number of smokers by 213,000 in 2013, and make smaller inroads into 2031.

Said Dr. Michael Fein-stein, program director with the American Lung Association of Palm Beach County: "Our ridiculous warning in tiny little letters that are almost unreadable really has had no effect.

"I think a picture is worth a thousand words."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.