



## Department of Health

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Dear Colleagues:

Welcome to my May letter. In honor of Mother's Day, I'd like to discuss two public health challenges pertinent to women's health: nicotine addiction and breastfeeding.

**Nicotine addiction:** Let's call cigarette smoking what you already know it is: an addiction to a drug. And like any addiction, it needs to be medically treated, sometimes repeatedly, since relapse is common. As physicians, you play a major role in combatting this deadly addiction. Research shows that half of all smokers who try to quit are motivated by their provider's recommendation. The recommendation is strengthened when physicians prescribe medication and counseling, two methods scientifically proven to work. Currently, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved seven pharmacotherapies for tobacco addiction --five nicotine replacement therapies (gum, patch, lozenge, inhaler, and nasal spray) and two medications Wellbutrin (bupropion) and Chantix (varenicline). Patients who are encouraged to quit and begin medication are two times more likely to remain smoke-free than those who receive counseling alone.

As you have heard many times, tobacco is the leading preventable cause of disease, disability and death in New York State. Smoking is especially hazardous for women during pregnancy. Mothers who smoke are at risk for ectopic pregnancy; their babies are more susceptible to low birth weight and birth defects such as orofacial clefts. Exposure to secondhand smoke is linked to lung cancer, stroke and heart disease. Children who are exposed are at greater risk for impaired lung functioning and lower respiratory illness, otitis media and sudden infant death syndrome.

To make physicians more aware of the importance of their role in helping New Yorkers quit smoking, the Department recently launched the Treat Nicotine Addiction Campaign and the website: <http://talktoyourpatients.ny.gov/>. The site provides prescribing information about medications, as well as tips on counseling, resources and other ways to support your patients as they work to overcome their addiction. Most private insurance companies, as well as Medicaid and Medicare, cover smoking cessation medications and counseling. The good news is, New York's smoking rates are at an all-time low of 14.4%. Among women, smoking rates are at 12%, which represents a 29% decline between 2011 and 2014. Let's work together to drive down smoking rates further.

**Breastfeeding:** New York State is slated to become the fifth state in the nation to "Ban the Bag," a policy that will prohibit the state's 126 birthing hospitals from distributing gift bags containing marketing materials for infant formula, such as coupons and free samples. These regulations will also apply to hospital-affiliated clinics that provide care to maternity patients or newborns. Providing free formula samples and coupons to pregnant or postpartum women gives conflicting messages about breastfeeding, and contributes to reduced rates of exclusive breastfeeding and shorter breastfeeding duration. The goal of these regulations is to ensure that women receive consistent messaging and encouragement from all physicians, providers and

staff. As you know, breastmilk is more easily digested, provides infants with protection from colds, and lowers the risk for allergies, obesity and illnesses such as ear infections, diarrhea and respiratory infections. Breastfeeding also benefits moms by lowering their risk for breast and ovarian cancer, and type 2 diabetes.

Although 87% of new mothers in New York State breastfeed, only 17% meet national recommendations to exclusively breastfeed until an infant is six months old. More than 50% of women report not meeting their personal breastfeeding goals, in part, because hospital practices or community resources did not fully support them.

Physicians can promote and support breastfeeding and help increase breastfeeding rates by encouraging new moms to breastfeed, training staff, providing breastfeeding education, ensuring lactation support and becoming designated as a New York State Breastfeeding Friendly Practice (See: <http://www.health.ny.gov/community/pregnancy/breastfeeding/index.htm>). Physicians can also let women know about New York's new paid family leave policy, which provides 12 weeks of paid leave, enough time for new moms to establish the practice of breastfeeding.

The advice that physicians offer can strongly influence the lifestyle choices our patients make, whether it's smoking or breastfeeding. I hope you'll keep that in mind in your conversations with patients.

Thank you for your attention and, to all the moms, Happy Mothers' Day.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Howard Zucker M.D." in a cursive style.

Howard A. Zucker, M.D.