

# An Ounce of Prevention

## Teaching Healthy Behaviors in Local Schools

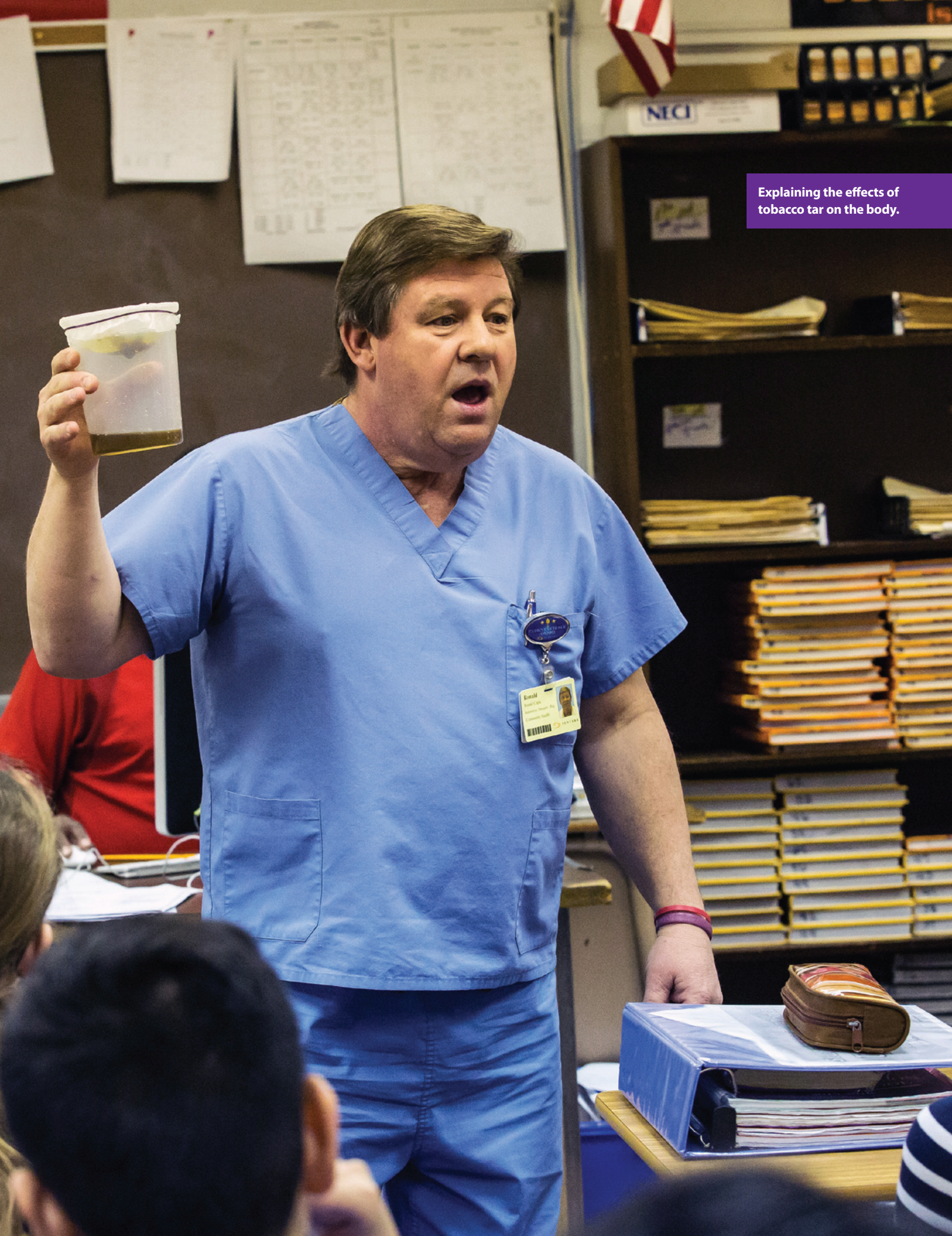
**T**he most effective health education starts early. Teaching children about good nutrition, disease prevention and other positive health issues gives them a better chance of making healthy choices as they grow up.

In Virginia schools, basic health education is an important component of the total curriculum, and the mission of both Sentara RMH Medical Center and Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital—to “Improve Health Every Day”—fits well with that academic objective, leading both hospitals to engage in providing health education programs to area elementary and middle school students. The partnership among the schools and hospitals aims to start health education at a young age, in hopes of building stronger, healthier communities.

### Discouraging Tobacco Use Among Middle Schoolers

Tobacco use is the number-one cause of preventable death and disease in the United States, contributing to life-threatening conditions such as





Explaining the effects of tobacco tar on the body.



Pointing out the cost, as well as health risks, of smoking.

heart disease, cancer (especially lung cancer), stroke and emphysema, as well as other forms of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Studies show that 90 percent of smokers start before age 18, and that the average age when youth start smoking is between 11 and 14 years. To help prevent tobacco use among adolescents, Sentara RMH Community Health offers the Toward No Tobacco (TNT) program in all Harrisonburg City and Rockingham County middle schools.

“We’re trying to reach students during the most likely time when they would be initiating tobacco use,” says Erica Rollins, health education and awareness coordinator for Sentara RMH. “It’s a critical time in their lives.”

Rollins oversees the TNT program, which has been offered since 2007.

The program’s evidence-based tobacco prevention curriculum, funded by grants from the Virginia Foundation for Healthy

Youth, United Way and the RMH Foundation, provides 10 sessions for seventh-graders and two “booster sessions” for eighth-graders, covering information on tobacco use, addiction and preventable disease. The curriculum focuses on cultivating skills in active listening, effective communication and assertiveness,

and building self-esteem.

“These skills help kids resist peer pressure to smoke,” Rollins says. “Kids with higher self-esteem are better prepared to resist risky behaviors.”

Ron Cople, a respiratory therapist at Sentara RMH, teaches the courses to local middle schoolers.

“As a respiratory therapist, I see the end result of tobacco use every day when I’m caring for patients clinically,” Cople says. “I bring the reality of that experience to the classroom and share it with the students, so they’re not just reading something out of a textbook. The negative consequences of tobacco use are very real, and are having a devastating impact on friends, neighbors and families in our community.”

Cople uses objects such as balloons and coffee filters to demonstrate the impact of tobacco on the lungs and other organs. Students are especially fascinated, he says, when he brings in swine lungs—similar to human lungs—that have been damaged by tobacco use.

“The students get to see firsthand what tobacco really does to the lungs,” Cople says.

The sessions Cople teaches are part of school health and physical education courses, and students are graded on assignments and participation. For one homework assignment, Cople has the students interview a smoker, asking questions such as how old they were when they started smoking, why they started

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smoking, what consequences they have experienced and what advice for others they have about smoking. The information the students gather from the interviews sparks meaningful classroom discussions.

“In the seven years I have been teaching this program, only one student got the advice from a tobacco user that it’s an adult choice they are free to make,” Cople says. “Among the thousands of kids in middle school who have undertaken this project, the advice is most often negative. Smokers almost always tell the students they regret their choice to start smoking, and they point out how much it has cost them—both financially and in terms of their health. They often say, ‘If I could quit, I would.’ And the students really get it. They understand that people don’t like to be addicted to tobacco.”

The TNT program is having a significant impact, according to Cople and Rollins. In 2003, before the program started, 22.7 percent of youth in Harrisonburg and Rockingham

County were using tobacco products, according to the Youth Data Survey conducted by the Office on Children and Youth. By 2013, when the last data was collected, the rate of tobacco use among teenagers in those areas was down to 13.1 percent.

“By reducing the number of kids who smoke or use dip, we’re helping to alleviate some of the death and disease caused by tobacco, including heart disease, stroke, cancer and respiratory disease,” Rollins says. “The TNT program is helping to build a healthier future for many of our middle school students.”

### Health Topics for Elementary School Students

A group of kindergartners in Charlottesville recently got to see the prevalence of “germs” on their hands, thanks to Jackie Martin, director of Sentara Martha Jefferson’s Community Benefit Office.

As part of the lesson, Martin first taught the children the proper technique for washing





Teaching children about germs on the hands.

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hands thoroughly. She then had them put on a special hand lotion that glows under black light. The children then tried washing their hands to see if they could remove all of the “germs”—really just the remnants of the fluorescent lotion.

The lesson was part of Sentara Martha Jefferson’s Elementary School Standards of Learning (SOL) Program, which has been offered to elementary students in Charlottesville City schools for the past seven years.

More than 450 classroom sessions have been conducted in that time, Martin says. Evaluations of the program, conducted on fourth-graders who had participated in the program since kindergarten, found that students retained, on average, 93 percent of the information they were taught in kindergarten, including the proper way to wash their hands.

The interactive lessons, taught by Martin and a volunteer, are tied to Virginia’s health

SOL requirements and cover topics such as healthy eating, fitness, bicycle safety and empathy. A two-part unit on healthy snacking, for example, involves a food-sorting activity and making a healthy snack. During a three-part unit on empathy, students have the opportunity to talk to a person with a disability and later to engage in a wheelchair activity. Though the children have fun riding around in the wheelchairs, they also learn about the challenges disabled persons face when trying to do everyday tasks like getting a drink from a water fountain.

“We make sure our activities are hands-on to keep the children engaged,” Martin says. “We want to keep their attention so they’ll remember the important lessons we’re teaching them.”

The lessons incorporate two of Sentara Martha Jefferson’s community health priorities: obesity and tobacco use (the hospital’s other two community priorities are access to prenatal care and mental health services). The program is another way in which Sentara Martha Jefferson attempts to meet its goal of improving health in the community.

“We’re all about preventing health problems,” Martin says. “Talking with young children about these health topics gives us a tremendous opportunity to plant seeds. It’s really about engaging kids to help them learn things they can do to grow up healthy.”