

JENNIFER RODRIGUEZ



kicking
butts

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Speedskating, Two-time Olympic medalist

I have had asthma since I was a little girl. It's a disease that makes it hard to breathe, especially when you're playing sports. I've always had to think about my breathing. My parents would scare me to death about smoking. They told me that my lungs would close up and that I would die. And as a kid, I believed them.

I have also been an athlete since I was five years old. It has been the biggest part of my life for as long as I can remember. I can't imagine not being involved with sports and competition. It's who I am and what I do.

My friends at school always admired me because I was an athlete. They looked up to me. I got to skate all over the world. When I was 15, I was the only girl picked from the U.S. to go to New Zealand for a

championship. My friends thought that was the coolest. I didn't have to smoke to "fit in." They understood when I would say, "Sorry, can't smoke – I need to breathe for my sport." Or, "Sorry, can't take any drugs – I will be drug tested." When I was confronted with cigarettes, I always had my excuses ready – "I've got really bad asthma," or "I've got to train today."

The truth is that I can't stand the smell of cigarettes. Once, a girl at school asked me to hold her cigarette while she tied her sneakers. I must have held it for 15 seconds. And all day my fingertips smelled so gross. And it was in my hair and on my clothes. It's not only gross – it's terrible for you. A skating friend of mine has a mother who was a chain smoker. Her teeth are all yellow, and she had wrinkles when she was young. Now she is in the hospital with terrible lung

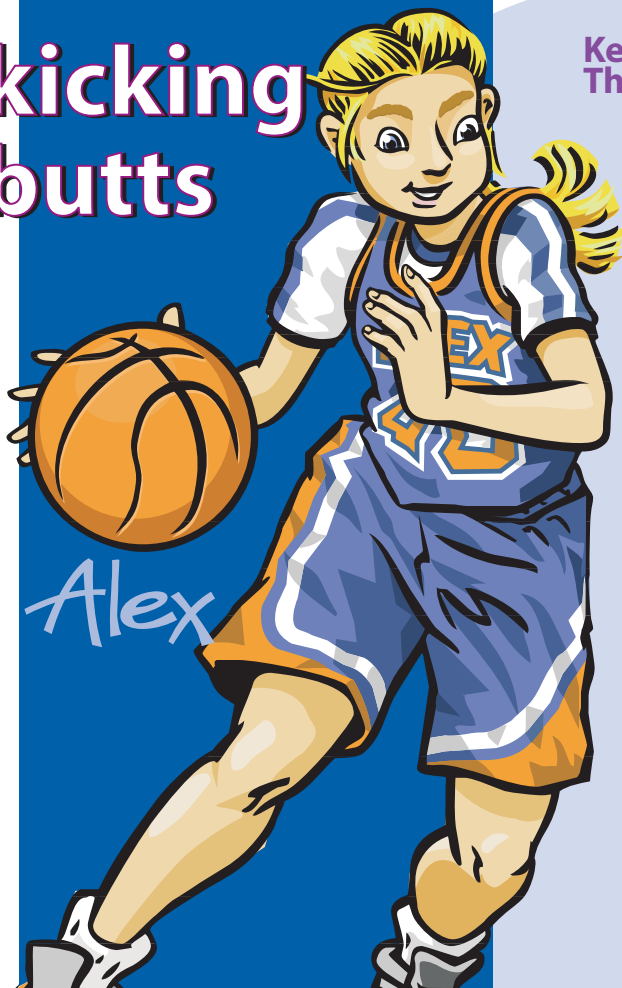
problems. When I think about what I want to be like five, 10, 20 years from now – yellow, wrinkled and hacking is not in the picture. Healthy, happy, fit and breathing big is where I'm headed.



The pressure to smoke isn't the only pressure girls deal with when it comes to getting a buzz. Read about how runner Aimee Mullins survived the pressure to drink at www.GoGirlGo.com.



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Keepin' it real: The truth about smoking

The rumor: "Smoking makes you look cool."

The truth: If you smoke, you will totally have nasty breath, stink, get yellow teeth, annoy people around you, waste your money and risk getting some scary diseases. There is nothing cool about getting asthma, allergies, cancer or breathing problems.

The rumor: "It's the popular thing to do — most kids smoke."

The truth: Most girls choose NOT to smoke. Eight out of 10 girls in eighth to 10th grades do not smoke.

The rumor: "Smoking makes you calm and chill."

The truth: Being a smoker makes you feel jumpy and jittery. The more you smoke, the more your body feels like it needs it. Wanting that next cigarette is what's making you feel nervous.

The rumor: "Smoking will make me skinny."

The truth: Smoking will dull your taste buds and sense of smell — but it doesn't mean that you will lose weight. If you are concerned about looks — how about the wrinkles and dull, dry skin that smoking will give you — or the stained teeth, the washed-out looking hair or the yellowing nails?

The last thing I want is asthma, allergies, cancer or breathing problems.

The rumor: "Cigarettes can't hurt me unless I smoke them."

The truth: Hanging around smokers is harmful, too. Breathing in the smoke from other people's cigarettes can hurt your body. Smoke in the air can irritate your eyes and throat, make you cough, cause breathing problems and worse.

What's a girl to do?

Athletes don't smoke. At least good ones don't. There is no way in the world you can fill your lungs with black smoke and expect them to put out for you. Swimmers, ballers, gymnasts, boxers – all athletes gotta be able to breathe to be any good. Smoking will surely make it harder to reach your dreams. The younger you start smoking – the worse

the effects are on your health. And once you are hooked, it is tough to give it up. Don't be a sucker to peer pressure. Stand up for yourself – for your looks, for your health, for your game, for your life. Choose to stay away from cigarettes and folks who smoke.

Quick points:

Cigarette smoking kills 1,200 people each day. That's 400,000 people dying a year!



Resources

www.4girls.gov
www.ash.org
www.kidshealth.org
www.tobaccofreekids.org