



 [Return to Web version](#)

Tobacco Addiction

Overview

Why does it seem so hard to stop smoking?

Smoking causes changes in your body and in the way you act. The changes in your body are caused by an addiction to nicotine. The changes in the way you act developed over time as you bought cigarettes, lit them and smoked them. These changes have become your smoking habit.

When you have a smoking habit, many things seem to go along with having a cigarette. These might include having a cup of coffee or an alcoholic drink, being stressed or worried, talking on the phone, driving, socializing with friends or wanting something to do with your hands.

What's in cigarettes?

Cigarettes contain substances that you would never think about putting in your body. For example, cigarettes contain tar, carbon monoxide and chemicals like DDT, arsenic and formaldehyde (a gas used to preserve dead animals).

The tobacco in cigarettes also contains nicotine--the drug that makes smoking addictive. All of these things are bad for your body. Nicotine raises your risk of heart attack and stroke. Tar and carbon monoxide cause serious breathing problems. And you know tobacco smoke causes cancer.

What if I smoke just a few cigarettes a day?

Even a few cigarettes a day are bad for your health. Once you start smoking, it can be very hard to stop. The nicotine in cigarettes is poisonous and very addictive. Once you start using it, your body will feel like it cannot function without it. Most adult smokers started when they were teenagers, and later realized that they couldn't stop smoking.

Is chewing tobacco as bad as cigarettes?

Yes. Both cigarettes and chewing tobacco are toxic to your body. You may hear more about the harm cigarettes do to the body, but chewing tobacco can also hurt your health. Chewing tobacco can cause sores and white patches in your mouth, as well as diseases and cancers of the mouth, gums and throat. Chewing can give you bad breath, discolor your teeth and cause tooth loss. And one chew contains 15 times the nicotine of a cigarette (meaning the risk of addiction is much higher).

Treatment

How can I stop smoking?

You'll have the best chance of stopping if you do the following:

- Get ready.
- Get support and encouragement.
- Learn how to handle stress and the urge to smoke.
- Get medication and use it correctly.
- Be prepared for relapse.
- Keep trying.

Steps to make quitting easier:

- **Pick a stop date.** Choose a date 2 to 4 weeks from today so you can get ready to quit. If possible, choose a time when things in your life will change, like when you're about to start a break from school. Or just pick a time when you don't expect any extra stress at school, work or home. For example, quit after final exams, not during them.
- **Make a list of the reasons why you want to quit.** Keep the list on hand so you can look at it when you have a nicotine craving.
- **Keep track of where, when and why you smoke.** You may want to make notes for a week or so to know ahead of time when and why you crave a cigarette. Plan what you'll do instead of smoking (see list above for ideas). You may also want to plan what you'll say to people who pressure you to smoke.
- **Throw away all of your tobacco.** Clean out your room if you have smoked there. Throw away your ashtrays and lighters--anything that you connect with your smoking habit.
- **Tell your friends that you're quitting.** Ask them not to pressure you about smoking. Find other things to do with them besides smoking.
- **When your stop date arrives, STOP.** Plan little rewards for yourself for each tobacco-free day, week or month. For example, buy yourself a new shirt or ask a friend to see a movie with you.

What about nicotine replacement products or medicine to help me stop smoking?

Nicotine replacement products are ways to take in nicotine without smoking. These products come in several forms: gum, patch, nasal spray, inhaler and lozenge. You can buy the nicotine gum, patch and lozenge without a prescription from your doctor. Nicotine replacement works by lessening your body's craving for nicotine and reducing withdrawal symptoms. This lets you focus on the changes you need to make in your habits and environment. Once you feel more confident as a nonsmoker, dealing with your nicotine addiction is easier.

Prescription medicines such as bupropion and varenicline help some people stop smoking. These medicines do not contain nicotine, but help you resist your urges to smoke.

Talk to your doctor about which of these products is likely to give you the best chance of success. For any of these products to work, you must carefully follow the directions on the package. It's very important that you don't smoke while using nicotine replacement products.

How can I get support and encouragement?

Tell your family and friends what kind of help you need. Their support will make it easier for you to stop smoking. Also, ask your family doctor to help you develop a plan for stopping smoking. He or she can give you information on telephone hotlines, such as 1-800-QUIT-NOW (784-8669), or self-help materials that can be very helpful. Your doctor can also recommend a stop-smoking program. These programs are often held at local hospitals or health centers.

Give yourself rewards for stopping smoking. For example, with the money you save by not smoking, buy yourself something special.

Remember, you will need some help to stop smoking. Nine out of 10 smokers who try to go "cold turkey" fail because nicotine is so addictive. But it is easy to find help to quit.

What about stress and my urges to smoke?

You may have a habit of using cigarettes to relax during stressful times. Luckily, there are good ways to manage stress without smoking. Relax by taking a hot bath, going for a walk, or breathing slowly and deeply. Think of changes in your daily routine that will help you resist the urge to smoke. For example, if you used to smoke when you drank coffee, drink hot tea instead.

How will I feel when I quit?

You may feel edgy and irritable. You also may get angry or upset faster, have trouble concentrating and feel hungrier than usual. You may have headaches and cough more at first (while your lungs are clearing out). All of these can be symptoms of withdrawal from nicotine. Keep in mind that the worst symptoms will be over in a few days. However, you may still have cravings for tobacco. Those cravings have less to do with nicotine addiction and more to do with the habit of smoking.

Will I gain weight when I quit?

Some people gain a few pounds. Other people lose weight. The main reason some people gain weight is because they eat more food as a substitute for smoking. You can avoid gaining weight by watching how much you eat, staying busy and working out.

What if I can't quit?

You can quit. Most people try to quit more than once before they succeed. So don't give up if you slip. Remind yourself of why you want to quit. Think about what happened to make you slip. Figure out how you'll handle that situation differently next time. Then recommit yourself to quitting. You can do it!

Complications

How does smoking hurt my health?

Smoking can shorten your life by as much as 14 years. Smoking can cause many diseases, including lung cancer, mouth cancers and heart disease. It can also cause a cough that won't go away, and it may make it hard for you to breathe.

How does smoking affect me right now?

There are several reasons to quit smoking now:

- Smoking gives you bad breath.
- Smoking makes your clothes and hair smell bad.
- Smoking turns your teeth and fingers yellow and makes your skin wrinkle more easily.
- Smoking makes you get tired more quickly when you exercise.
- Smoking raises your heartbeat and your blood pressure.
- Smoking damages your immune system. You may get colds, the flu or even pneumonia more often if you smoke.
- Smoking can affect your sexual performance by making it more difficult for blood to reach all of the body's organs.
- Smoking weakens your tendons and ligaments, making it easier to get injured. It also makes it harder for injuries to heal.
- Smoking is affecting people around you. Second-hand smoke is dangerous, too.
- Smoking is costing you money.
- You're setting a bad example for your children.

How does smoking affect me in the long-term?

Smoking causes many adverse health conditions, including an increased risk of:

- Lung cancer and many other types of cancer
- Heart disease
- Serious breathing problems
- Stomach ulcers and acid reflux
- Gum disease
- Damage to babies of pregnant women who smoke

Smoking can also cost you time lost working or having fun because you're sick.

Prevention

How do I say "No" to tobacco?

Television and radio make it sound easy to "Just say no" to drugs, alcohol and tobacco. But it may not be so simple. You may be facing pressures from friends who smoke, you may be stressed out at home, school or work, or you may think smoking is going to make people like you. Don't let anyone or anything, whether it's friends or cigarette ads, convince you that it's okay to smoke. If you need help to say no, there are people who can help you. Talk to someone you can trust, like a teacher, a school counselor or your family doctor.

Other Organizations

- AAFP's Ask and Act
- Nicotine Anonymous
- American Lung Association
- American Cancer Society
- American Heart Association
- National Cancer Institute

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- How has smoking affected my health?
- How can I quit smoking?
- Is there medicine that can help me quit smoking?
- Can you recommend some organizations and support groups that can help me quit smoking?
- How can I prevent my kids from smoking?

Source

Reducing Tobacco Use in Adolescents by Irene M. Rosen, LTC, MC, USA, and Douglas M. Maurer, MAJ, MC, USA (*American Family Physician* February 15, 2008, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20080215/483.html>)

Written by familydoctor.org editorial staff

Reviewed/Updated: 02/11
Created: 09/09