

A Brief Guide to Smoking Cessation

Smoking is the number one cause of preventable death in America. Individuals who smoke have an increased risk of cancer, lung disease, heart attack, stroke, vascular disease, and even blindness, and have, on average, a life expectancy that is at least 10 years shorter than that for nonsmokers. In spite of the well-documented link between smoking and these serious medical conditions, many people find it extremely difficult to quit smoking. The primary reason underlying this difficulty is that nicotine can be as addictive as cocaine or heroin.

Although stopping smoking can be difficult, the health benefits for those who succeed are significant and well worth the effort. For example, after one year your risk of coronary heart disease drops by 50 percent.

Knowing how difficult it is to overcome nicotine-related smoking addiction, individuals who decide to quit first need to develop a plan that takes into account the obstacles they are likely to encounter and the resources available to help them overcome these obstacles. This process starts by assessing your readiness.

- What is your motivation for stopping?
- What is likely to happen to you health-wise if you do not stop?
- What are the benefits if you can?

When listing benefits, start with the positive impact this will have on your health (e.g., living longer, reducing your risk of a heart attack, stroke, cancer, and lung disease), but be sure to include the benefits it will have on others (e.g., reducing their risk of diseases associated with secondhand smoke) and the financial benefits for you and your family as you spend less on tobacco products. Keep this list in a place where you can review it regularly.

Think through your daily routine and identify the various challenges you will face and the resources that are available.

- In what situations will the temptation to smoke be the greatest?
- What events are likely to trigger the urge to smoke?
- Has smoking been one of the ways you typically respond to stress or feelings of depression?

If you have tried to stop smoking before, review how you approached the challenge then and what interfered with your attempt(s), and understand that your chance of stopping forever increases with every attempt you make.

- What can you do differently this time?
- Who are the people most likely to discourage or interfere with your effort to quit smoking?
- Who are the individuals you will definitely be able to count on to support your effort?

As you begin to develop your smoking cessation plan, consult with your health care provider and inquire about medications that have been approved to help people stop smoking. Studies have

shown that taking these medications can improve your chance of success. Make sure you understand how to use the medication and what side effects there might be. You also can ask if your provider knows of any hospital-sponsored smoking cessation programs or behavioral health professionals (e.g., psychologists or other mental health professionals) who specialize in working with individuals who are trying to stop smoking. If there are no programs or professionals in your community, telephone counseling is available at 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

The next step is to share your decision to quit and your motivation for quitting with family and friends. Request their support, offering them specific suggestions when you can. For example, ask those who smoke not to do so around you and those who do not smoke, especially the ones who did at one time but were able to quit, to provide encouragement for your efforts.

Because people often use smoking as a method of coping with stress, you may want to practice some stress management techniques before you stop smoking. Also build time and opportunities for more physical activity into your smoking cessation plan. This can help reduce stress and can also burn some of the extra calories if you find yourself eating more when you stop smoking.

Making changes in your home and work environment can help. Discard or move out of sight ashtrays and other items associated with smoking. Plan on changing your daily routine as well, and be sure to include pleasurable activities, especially ones that can help distract you when you have the urge to smoke.

Once you have identified the various challenges you will face, devised strategies for meeting these challenges, and pulled together the social resources (e.g., family, friends, and coworkers) and medical resources (e.g., medication) you will need, you are ready to stop smoking. The first few weeks are likely to be difficult, so during this time be sure to make good use of all the strategies and resources you have included in your plan (e.g., regularly review your list of reasons for stopping, spend time with your nonsmoking friends, and stay active).

You also need to be prepared for setbacks –difficult or stressful situations where you are unable to resist the urge to smoke. If these occur, do not become discouraged and give up on your plan to quit smoking. Relapses are fairly common, even among highly motivated individuals, and do not mean that you will not be successful eventually. Use each setback as a learning experience and an opportunity to improve your plan. What situational or emotional cues seemed to trigger the smoking? How could you avoid these cues or handle them more effectively? Then start again. Remember, the benefits of giving up smoking are so great that it is worth repeated efforts, and your likelihood of quitting for good goes up each time you try.

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