

## Withdrawal

### Introduction

Stopping smoking is different for everyone. Some smokers find it easy to quit, others don't. However, there are some signs and symptoms that many people have in common when they quit.<sup>1,2</sup>

### What are withdrawal symptoms?

Withdrawal symptoms are a collection of changes in your mood and body.<sup>3,4</sup> They usually appear when you stop smoking and are relieved or reversed by starting smoking again.<sup>3</sup>

Most symptoms occur because you are no longer getting nicotine, the addictive drug in tobacco.<sup>1,4</sup> Nicotine in other forms, such as nicotine patches, gum, lozenges, mouth spray or inhalator, can reduce the strength of withdrawal symptoms.<sup>4</sup>

Common symptoms of withdrawal are<sup>1,2,4,5</sup>:

- Urges to smoke (cravings)
- Depressed mood
- Difficulty sleeping or sleep disturbances
- Irritability, frustration or anger
- Anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Restlessness
- Increased appetite (hunger) or weight gain

Some people have reported other symptoms, which might also be due to stopping smoking:

- Coughing<sup>2</sup> and possibly other cold symptoms (sneezing, deafness)<sup>6</sup>
- Mouth ulcers<sup>2,6</sup>
- Bowel disturbance, constipation<sup>2,7</sup>
- Mood swings<sup>8</sup>
- Dizziness<sup>2</sup>
- Increased dreaming<sup>2</sup>

Coughing before and after stopping smoking is common, but this usually decreases over one to two months after quitting.<sup>9,10</sup> Mouth ulcers and bowel symptoms appear to affect small numbers of people only.<sup>6,7</sup>

It's common for people to have at least a few withdrawal symptoms when they quit.<sup>11</sup> Many people only have mild symptoms, but some have more severe symptoms.<sup>11</sup> Some people also report positive effects from stopping smoking, such as feeling more satisfied, and an improved sense of smell and taste.<sup>8, 12</sup>

## How long do withdrawal symptoms last?

Withdrawal symptoms usually appear within the first one to two days and are strongest in the first week. For many people, most symptoms fade and are gone after about two to four weeks.<sup>2</sup> Of course, on top of these symptoms are life's usual emotional ups and downs. These moments can be hard when you're trying to avoid falling back on your usual response of having a cigarette. Many people find withdrawal a "bumpy ride".<sup>13</sup>

Not all people follow this pattern. Instead their symptoms either fall then rise a few weeks later, or they do not go away for several weeks.<sup>2, 13</sup> If this happens to you, advice and support is available from the Quitline (13 7848) or your doctor.

Six months after quitting, people tend to feel less stressed than when they were smoking.<sup>14</sup>

An increase in appetite may last for six months or more.<sup>1, 4</sup> Most people do gain some weight when they stop smoking, which mostly occurs in the first one or two years after they quit.<sup>15, 16</sup> In the long term, the average weight of ex-smokers is similar to or not much more than people who have never smoked.<sup>15, 17</sup>

## Cravings

Most people have strong and frequent cravings (the urge or desire to smoke) in the first days after they stop smoking.<sup>18</sup> After about a month, strong cravings tend to happen less often, and not every day.<sup>19</sup>

Cravings can be due to nicotine withdrawal.<sup>4</sup> However, a desire to smoke can also be triggered by things that you've learned to link with smoking, much like seeing or smelling tasty food can make you feel hungry.<sup>18, 20, 21</sup>

Triggers can be quite varied.<sup>20, 21</sup> For example, they can be linked to places where you normally smoked, people who you usually smoked with, and being near other people smoking. Habits or routines such as smoking after meals, drinking coffee or alcohol, or talking on the telephone may bring on cravings. A lot of people feel the urge to smoke when they feel angry, stressed, bored, tense or happy; or when they want to relax. Often, it's a combination of where you are, what you're doing and how you're feeling that create a strong urge to smoke.<sup>20</sup>

If you have habits strongly linked to smoking or you smoke to lift your mood, being confronted by these triggers after you quit may make your cravings and withdrawal

symptoms seem worse.<sup>22</sup> Planning what to do in these situations instead of smoking, plus using quit smoking medications to reduce withdrawal symptoms, can help you stay quit.<sup>23, 24</sup> As you become used to doing other things, these urges to smoke tend not to happen as often and be less strong.<sup>3, 21</sup>

Some people have occasional urges to smoke long after other withdrawal symptoms have gone.<sup>3</sup> If this happens to you, try not to be disheartened. Even though you've decided that you want to be a non-smoker, there may be times when you still have a desire to smoke. Remind yourself why you want to quit, think how far you've come and what you've gained.

## Coping with withdrawal symptoms

- Nicotine replacement products - the patch, lozenges, mouth spray, gum and inhalator - help reduce nicotine withdrawal symptoms and increase your chances of quitting successfully.<sup>25</sup> They are sold at pharmacies and some supermarkets. Nicotine patches are much cheaper if you get a prescription for them from your doctor.
- There are two prescription medicines, varenicline (brand name Champix) and bupropion (brand name Zyban or Prexaton), that also reduce nicotine withdrawal symptoms and increase your chances of quitting successfully.<sup>26-28</sup> These medicines must be prescribed by a doctor, as they are not suitable for all people.
- If you are concerned about weight gain, talk to a doctor or dietician, and make a sensible eating plan. Plan healthy meals and snacks ahead of time. Be realistic - allow yourself some treats occasionally. Weight gain may be delayed while using a nicotine replacement product, varenicline or bupropion.<sup>24, 29</sup>
- Doing exercise you enjoy can help reduce cravings and withdrawal symptoms and may help keep your weight down.<sup>29-31</sup>
- Try doing activities which give you pleasure and a sense of well being, such as reading, getting involved in new or favourite hobbies, or spending more time with friends and family. Perhaps relax by having a massage or spa, doing deep breathing exercises, listening to music, or taking yoga classes.
- Try to resist smoking "just one" cigarette. People who smoke occasionally after quitting report having worse withdrawal symptoms.<sup>13</sup> 'Slip-ups' commonly lead to going back to regular smoking.<sup>32</sup>
- Tea, coffee, chocolate and some soft drinks contain caffeine. When you stop smoking, your body retains much more of this stimulant, which can make you feel restless, irritable, anxious and sleepless.<sup>33</sup> Do not drink more

cups of coffee or other drinks containing caffeine to distract yourself from cravings for cigarettes.

- Remember the good things that are happening to your body as well. Now that you have stopped smoking, your body can start to heal and reverse the damage from cigarettes.<sup>10, 34</sup>
- It's important to keep encouraging yourself to stick to your decision to quit. Make a list of the good things about being a non-smoker. Give yourself a pat on the back for your daily successes, and reward yourself occasionally with the money you have saved.
- Doing something about managing other sources of stress in your life may help you cope better with withdrawal. Other things which make you tense or frustrated can make your withdrawal symptoms seem worse than they actually are.<sup>35</sup> Try the exercise "Doing something about stress" in the booklet "Quit because you can" available by calling Quit on 13 7848.
- You need to understand why you smoke in order to plan how to cope without cigarettes when you quit. You may need to change your behaviour or avoid situations that trigger urges to smoke for a little while. Those who are most successful at resisting the urge to smoke use a range of coping strategies to help them.<sup>20</sup> For more information, advice and support, call the Quitline 13 7848.

Here is one way to confront your cravings and overcome the urge to smoke.

***Remember the 4Ds:***

- **Delay** acting on the urge to open a pack and light a cigarette. After a few minutes, the urge to smoke weakens.
- **Deep breathe.** Take a long, slow breath, and let it out slowly. Repeat three times.
- **Do something else.** Take your mind off smoking by taking action: put on some music, keep your hands busy, go for a walk or ring a friend.
- **Drink water.** Sip it slowly, and hold it in your mouth to savour the taste.

## **Before stopping smoking**

### ***Medicines***

Chemicals in cigarettes change the way some medications work.<sup>1, 36</sup> In some cases, the dose of your medication may have to be changed by your doctor. See your doctor before quitting if you are taking any medication.

## **Mental illness**

Stopping smoking can affect some medications prescribed for mental illnesses.<sup>1, 24, 37</sup> See your doctor for advice before quitting. With the right support, many people with mental illness have quit, and they generally feel a lot better, not just physically, but also emotionally.

## **Online resources**

The Quit website [www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au) provides a range of information that you can read, interact with and download. You can find out more about the Quitline, QuitCoach and QuitTxt.

The QuitCoach is a free interactive website that asks you a series of questions about your smoking, and then gives you advice about quitting which is tailored to your situation. To find out more go to [www.quitcoach.org.au](http://www.quitcoach.org.au).

QuitTxt provides regular SMS messages including tips and encouragement to help you keep on track throughout your quit attempt. To begin, all you need to do is register and complete a brief questionnaire at [www.quit.org.au/quittxt](http://www.quit.org.au/quittxt).

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