

Nicotine patches

Please note: This information is not intended to replace the Consumer Medicine Information (pack insert) that should come with the nicotine patch. Ask your pharmacist for this information leaflet if it is not in the pack when you buy it.

Main points about nicotine replacement therapy products

- All forms of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) products – patches, lozenges, mouth spray, gum and inhalator – have been proven to help people quit smoking.¹
- Using NRT products is always safer than continuing to smoke.² NRT products are a safe alternative to cigarettes for smokers.³
- Using NRT products will still increase your chances of quitting even if it does not completely control cravings.⁴
- NRT products reduce the severity of cravings but you may still have them, especially in situations in which you are used to smoking.⁵⁻⁷
- Combination therapy (using the patch plus another type of NRT product) is better at suppressing cravings than a single NRT product.⁸ Some experts advise that most addicted smokers would benefit from using combination therapy.^{9, 10}
- NRT products work better when you also reduce triggers for cravings. Boost your chance of success by making your home smokefree and if possible, get rid of all cigarettes in your home and car.^{11, 12} You will also need to find new habits to take the place of smoking; for example, when socialising, relaxing, concentrating, filling in time or coping with emotions.
- Research shows that people who have the best chance of quitting using NRT products also get advice or support from their doctor, pharmacist or other trained advisor (such as through the Quitline).^{9, 13, 14}
- You will have more chance of success with the nicotine lozenges, mouth spray, gum or inhalator if you use them regularly throughout the day as well as when you have cravings.⁶
- If you slip-up and have a cigarette, it is safe to continue using NRT products and to keep trying to quit.¹⁰
- It is common for smokers to attempt to quit a number of times before they successfully stop.¹⁵

Is the nicotine patch suitable for me?

The nicotine patch works best for addicted smokers who want to quit.^{9, 14, 15} Your doctor or pharmacist can advise you whether the nicotine patch is suitable for you.

Signs of addiction include:

- You smoke your first cigarette within 30 minutes of waking up^{9, 16}
- You smoke more than 10 cigarettes per day.^{9, 16} (There is no difference between smoking stronger or weaker tasting cigarettes.¹⁷)
- You suffer from withdrawal symptoms within 24 hours of stopping smoking, such as cravings, irritability, anxiety, depression, restlessness, hunger, poor concentration or sleep disturbances.^{9, 18}

It is not clear how helpful the nicotine patch may be to smokers of 10 or less cigarettes per day, but use of a support service (such as the Quitline) and self-help materials is encouraged.^{9, 14, 15}

If you are age 12 years and over, you may use the nicotine patch. However if you are under 18 years you should speak to your doctor before using the patch.^{9, 19, 20} It is strongly recommended that people in this age group discuss quitting smoking with a trained health advisor to benefit from using the nicotine patch.^{15, 19, 20}

How does the nicotine patch work?

Addiction to nicotine in tobacco is the main reason why people continue to smoke. The patch works by replacing some of the nicotine you would normally inhale from cigarettes.²¹ You wear the patch on your skin, where it slowly releases nicotine, which is absorbed into your body.²¹

Using the patch can help to reduce withdrawal symptoms when you quit, such as cravings, irritability, anxiety and difficulty concentrating.^{6, 22-24} However, it may not stop these symptoms completely.⁶ More options are listed below under *Why may I still have cravings while using the patch?*

How well does the nicotine patch work?

People who use the nicotine patch are almost twice as likely to quit and stay stopped.¹

When using the patch you take in less nicotine at a much slower rate than when smoking. This makes it less addictive and easier to stop using than cigarettes. However, it is slower at easing cravings and may not stop sudden cravings in tempting situations.^{3, 6, 21, 25, 26} After putting on the patch, the level of nicotine in your

blood slowly rises and peaks about two to 12 hours later (depending on the patch brand).^{19, 20, 27} If you take off a patch and immediately put on a new patch, your nicotine level will remain raised. Over a day, patch users typically absorb up to two-thirds of the dose of nicotine that they would get from smoking a pack of 25 cigarettes per day.^{19, 20, 26-28}

Buying the nicotine patch

You can buy the nicotine patch without prescription from pharmacies and most supermarkets. You can also buy patches with a prescription from your doctor through the Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme (PBS), which is cheaper.

There are two different types of patches sold in Victoria. There are 24 hour patches, which come in three strengths of 21 mg, 14 mg, or 7 mg of nicotine. Also, there are 16 hour patches that you only wear during the daytime, which come in three strengths of 25 mg, 15 mg, or 10 mg of nicotine. The patches vary in size, with the bigger patches having the higher dose of nicotine. Some patches are clear so they are less visible.

All types of patch are listed on the PBS.²⁹ You can buy one 12 week course of patches through the PBS per year.⁹ To get the prescription, you must take part in a quit smoking support program, such as that provided by the Quitline. Your doctor will give you a prescription that will last four weeks on your first visit, and then, on your second visit, two repeat prescriptions for a further eight weeks of patches.

Remember to book your second appointment with your doctor before your first prescription runs out. In 2017, general patients pay \$38.80 (PBS price) for each 4 week prescription and concession holders pay \$6.30.³⁰

Patches are sold in packets of 7, 14 or 28. A packet of 7 patches bought over-the-counter costs between \$40 to \$60, depending on the brand of the patch (based on the recommended retail prices, as at September 2017). If you buy the larger pack sizes, the price works out to \$20 to \$42 per week. Pharmacy and supermarket prices can be a few dollars lower or higher per packet.

Which strength of patch should I use?

If you are using the 24 hour patch, the product information recommends starting on the 21 mg patch.^{31, 32}

If you are using the 16 hour patch and

- you smoke less than 15 cigarettes per day, the 15 mg patch is recommended.
- you smoke 15 or more cigarettes per day, the 25 mg patch is recommended.²⁰

In some cases, your pharmacist or doctor may recommend that you start on a lower strength patch based on your smoking habits, body weight or state of health.⁹

Research shows that the 16 hour patch works as well as the 24 hour patch.¹⁴ However different people may prefer one type of patch over another, depending on whether they feel better with steady levels of nicotine day and night (24 hour patch), or lower levels of nicotine at night and in the morning (16 hour patch).⁶ Some research suggests that for heavy smokers (20 or more cigarettes per day), the 24 hour patch may improve sleep and better help those who suffer from morning cravings.^{24, 33}

What do I need to tell my pharmacist or doctor?

Before buying the patch, you should tell your pharmacist or doctor if you have an illness, or if you are taking any other medicines (even non-prescription ones). In some cases, you may need medical supervision or advice, or in other cases the nicotine patch may not be suitable. Please check the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) that comes with the patch for the latest list of common medicines and medical conditions that may be affected by using the patch or stopping smoking.

Illnesses listed in the CMI for which you may need medical advice include: heart disease, any blood circulation disorder, kidney disease, liver disease, hyperthyroidism, diabetes, pheochromocytoma (a tumour of the adrenal gland), and allergic reactions that involve swelling of the lips, face and throat or itchy skin rash.^{19, 20, 31, 32}

The nicotine patch is not recommended for people with long term skin disorders such as psoriasis, dermatitis or urticaria.^{31, 32}

Can I use the patch if I am pregnant or breastfeeding?

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, it is recommended that you first try to quit without medication.^{15, 19, 20}

While using the patch is considered safer than smoking, nicotine from the patch may not be entirely risk-free for your baby. If you feel you need to use a nicotine replacement therapy product to help you quit, the better options are the nicotine lozenge, inhalator, mouth spray or gum.^{31, 32} These products usually provide a lower daily dose of nicotine than the patch. However, if you have nausea or sickness, a patch may be preferred. You may use the day-time patch to help you quit,⁹ and you must remove it before going to bed.^{19, 20} You need to discuss the risks and benefits with your pharmacist or doctor before using it, and you should tell the doctor supervising your pregnancy.^{2, 34}

If you are breastfeeding, you should not use the patch, however you can use the nicotine lozenge, mouth spray, inhalator, or gum.^{31, 32}

If you have any questions regarding these issues, please ask your doctor.

Using the nicotine patch

Once you've bought the patches, you should set a quit date. One patch is used per day. When applying the patch, make sure you press it onto a dry, hairless area of skin for about 10 seconds, to make sure it sticks properly. After it's on, wash and dry your hands to avoid getting nicotine in your eyes and nose. Do not use soap, as this may increase the amount of nicotine absorbed through your hands.^{31, 32}

The pack or the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) sheet that comes with the patches will tell you how many weeks to use them, and when to switch down to lower strength patches. The programs vary between 10 and 16 weeks.^{31, 32} If you didn't get the CMI or you've lost it, ask your pharmacist for it.

Research shows that using the patch for eight weeks works just as well as using them for longer.¹⁴ Highly addicted smokers who still have cravings and withdrawal symptoms eight weeks after quitting may benefit from longer use.²² There is no evidence that switching down to smaller patches in later weeks is better than simply stopping use after finishing the course of larger patches.¹⁴

Remember: The nicotine patch is a medicine and you should use it according to the advice from your pharmacist or doctor.

Using combination therapy

Combination therapy means using two types of nicotine products, such as the nicotine patch and nicotine lozenge, at the same time. You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist first before using combination therapy. They may recommend combination therapy if you have had cravings or not succeeded in quitting when using a single nicotine replacement therapy product in the past.^{19, 20}

Research suggests that using combination therapy increases your chances of quitting compared to using one product alone,¹⁴ and that it is better at suppressing cravings.⁸ Some experts advise that most addicted smokers would benefit from using combination therapy.^{9, 10} Research suggests that suppressing cravings on your quit date in particular, for example by using nicotine replacement therapy products, may increase the chance of success.^{8, 35} However, living in a smoky home and having quick and easy access to cigarettes can work against you,¹¹ even when you use combination therapy.¹²

Combination therapy has been approved for the use of

- the 25 mg or 15 mg 16 hour patch, or the 21 mg 24 hour patch *with*
- the 2 mg nicotine lozenge, 1.5 mg mini lozenge, mouth spray, 2 mg gum, or inhalator.^{31, 32}

After applying the patch to reduce withdrawal symptoms, another type of nicotine product is used to relieve cravings, which can be triggered by old smoking situations or emotions.^{6, 21} The product information recommends using at least four lozenges or pieces of gum per day, and no more than 12 pieces per day.^{31, 32} No more than 6 inhalator cartridges or 32 mouth sprays should be used per day.³¹ The Consumer Medicine Information sheet that comes with the patches or the other products will tell you how long you should use them and how to stop using them.

Using the patch before quitting

If you usually smoke 15 or more cigarettes per day, you may use a patch while reducing your smoking for two weeks before your quit date. You can either use a 21 mg 24 hour patch (branded 'Nicabate P' or 'Pre-Quit' patch) or the 25 mg 16 hour patch. On your quit date you may then continue to use the patch or combination therapy.^{31, 32} Evidence suggests that this method improves your chance of quitting over starting use of a nicotine patch on your quit date.^{14, 36}

Smokers who smoke less than 15 cigarettes per day, or have cardiovascular disease, or weigh less than 45 kg, should not use a patch while continuing to smoke.¹⁹

Unlike using the inhalator, gum or lozenge when smoking, smokers who use the patch while smoking tend to have increased nicotine blood levels compared to smoking alone. However, evidence suggests that smoking while using the patch is safe for heavier smokers, and nicotine from medications does not appear to add to the health risks of smoking.^{2, 14, 36, 37} There have been no reports of serious side effects from using the nicotine patch while smoking in studies.^{37, 38} Symptoms from too much nicotine (nicotine overdose) are rare,³⁹ and are described in the Consumer Medicine Information.^{31, 32}

Why may I still having cravings while using the patch?

You may still have cravings while using the patch because:

- You may not be using it properly. Read the above section *Using the patch* and the product information to avoid common problems.
- You may not be getting enough nicotine from the patch. Your options include switching from the 16 hour to the 24 hour patch, or using two different nicotine products at the same time. Speak to your pharmacist or doctor, if you think this is a likely cause of your cravings.
- You have an urge or desire to smoke when you are in situations where you are used to smoking. Using two different nicotine products at the same time may help.^{14, 21} (Read *Using combination therapy* above)

Certain things may trigger cravings, such as:⁴⁰

- **places** where you normally smoke, such as home, work, or the pub
- **people** who you usually smoke with, such as family or friends; or being alone
- **habits or routines** where you are used to smoking, such as when drinking coffee or alcohol, talking on the telephone, after meals, or when you want to relax
- **emotions**, such as anger, boredom, being tense or upset; or for some people, when they are happy.

You need to understand why you smoke in order to plan ways to deal with these situations. People most successful at resisting urges to smoke use a range of coping strategies to help them.⁴⁰ Making your home smokefree, avoiding trigger situations where possible in the first few weeks, and getting rid of cigarettes in your home and car are all helpful strategies.^{11, 12, 41} Information, advice or support is available for the cost of a local call from the Quitline 13 7848.

Side effects of the nicotine patch

The most common side effect is a rash on the skin where the patch is worn.^{19, 20, 26} Moving the patch to a new area of skin each day will help reduce skin irritation, and there are also medicated skin creams available at pharmacies.^{26, 42}

Some people have sleep disturbances or vivid dreams, particularly with the high dose 24 hour patch. In these cases, it's recommended that you either take off the 24 hour patch just before bedtime, or switch to the 16 hour patch.²⁶

Less common side effects include headache, nausea and indigestion.^{19, 20} Most users rate these reactions as mild. If side effects do not fade within a week or two, or they worry you, see your pharmacist or doctor.

Serious side effects are rare,³⁹ and are described in the Consumer Medicine Information that comes with the patch. If you have these symptoms, follow the instructions in the leaflet and see a doctor as soon as possible.^{31, 32} These symptoms can occur from absorbing too much nicotine, so do not smoke.

Safety of the nicotine patch

Using the nicotine patch is always safer than continuing to smoke. Tobacco smoke contains many cancer-causing substances, carbon monoxide and other dangerous chemicals, which the nicotine patch does not.² Unlike smoking, nicotine is not a major cause of increased risk for heart disease or cancer.^{2, 43-45} The patch does not increase your risk of heart attack if you have heart disease.^{2, 46}

It is important to store and dispose of the patch so that children and animals cannot get it, as it can be dangerous for them.^{31, 32}

What do I do if I start smoking again despite using the patch?

If you slip-up and have a puff or a cigarette, don't let it lead you back to full-time smoking. It is safe to keep using the patch and re-commit to stopping smoking.^{3, 6} Think of your reasons for quitting and what you have achieved so far. Call the Quitline if you want to discuss your smoking.

Think about getting some extra help if you are trying to stop smoking using the patch and:

- you are smoking a similar number of cigarettes as usual and you feel you're not making progress towards stopping, or
- you are still smoking after using the patch for three months, even if it's just now and then.¹⁰

Your doctor or the Quitline can help you address what's stopping you from quitting and discuss further options.

It is common for smokers to attempt to quit a number of times before successfully staying stopped, even when using the patch or other nicotine replacement therapy product.¹⁵ For many people, re-adjusting to living without cigarettes is a learning process. It may take a while to figure out alternatives to cigarettes in certain situations. The purpose of the patch is to ease nicotine withdrawal symptoms while you deal with other aspects of quitting smoking.⁶

If you have found the nicotine patch useful in quitting smoking, but have taken up smoking again, you should consider using the patch or another nicotine replacement therapy product when you quit again.^{3, 14}

Who can I talk to for more information?

- Your doctor is an important source of information, particularly if you have an illness, or you are taking any other medicines.
- Your pharmacist can give you advice about stopping smoking.
- Quitline 13 7848: Quitline advisors can help you with support, advice, information and a variety of resources, whether you have already quit or are just thinking about it.

Online resources

The **Quit website** 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.

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.

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.

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