

Why Do I Smoke and Why Do I Keep Smoking?

Most people who smoke tobacco start during their teenage years or as a young adult. There are many reasons why a person starts to smoke. For some teens, it is a way to rebel against their parents. Other teens may feel pressure from their friends (peer pressure) and begin smoking as a way to appear “cool”. Some may be modeling a parent’s or sibling’s behavior, and others believe it is a way to relieve stress or boredom. Even if you don’t think you are going to keep smoking, it is very easy to get “hooked” or addicted because of the nicotine found in all tobacco products.



Being dependent on (addicted to) the nicotine means that you need to keep getting nicotine. Your body depends on it to feel comfortable and you will have uncomfortable symptoms if you don’t get enough of it or often enough. When you don’t get enough nicotine you will have symptoms of withdrawal.

Addiction to the nicotine in tobacco can happen very quickly, even after only smoking for a short time or smoking only a few cigarettes. The good news is that you can overcome addiction to nicotine. Knowing more about the science behind nicotine addiction may make it easier for you to take steps to becoming tobacco-free.

The simple facts:

Nicotine is a chemical that is present in all forms of tobacco. Nicotine is also found in electronic cigarettes and the liquid used in ENDS (electronic nicotine delivery systems).

Nicotine is highly addictive. When a person uses tobacco, either by smoking cigarettes, using chewing tobacco or by using another form of tobacco, nicotine enters the body and activates nicotine receptors in the brain.

The faster the delivery of nicotine to your body, the greater the addictive effect on the brain. Cigarettes have been designed to give high levels of nicotine to the brain very quickly.

When you smoke a cigarette it only takes six to ten seconds for the nicotine to reach your brain. This makes smoking tobacco very addictive and difficult to stop.

Nicotine that is inhaled in cigarette smoke is absorbed by the lungs into the bloodstream and quickly goes to the heart and brain. The brain reacts to the nicotine by releasing chemicals that imitate the same effects on a person’s mood as amphetamines (“speed”) and cocaine. Nicotine is a stimulant that speeds up a person’s reaction

time and increases his or her attention and focus.

Many smokers report that they enjoy the ritual of smoking. They also say that smoking gives them a pleasurable feeling. Smoking relieves their nicotine withdrawal symptoms.

Shortly after smoking their last cigarette, smokers start to feel a negative mood change. This “withdrawal” from the chemical nicotine makes the smoker uncomfortable. Many smokers report feeling anxious, irritable and restless when they stop smoking. This is because they are not getting what the brain feels it needs to work well. Smokers usually experience relief from these unpleasant feelings as soon as they smoke again, use other tobacco products, or nicotine replacement medications (additional information on these topics about nicotine and tobacco is available at www.thoracic.org/patients).

Symptoms of Nicotine Withdrawal

- Irritability, frustration, anger
- Increased appetite
- Tremors
- Depression
- Insomnia
- Anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty feeling pleasure

The Power of Nicotine Addiction

Physical addiction to nicotine is not the same for everyone. Some people may experience mild addiction. Others can rapidly progress to severe addiction. When a person experiences a strong urge to smoke that is difficult to ignore, it is called a craving.

Healthcare providers can use a scale to rate your level of addiction to nicotine (see the Fagerstrom Test for

Nicotine Dependence). Based on your answers to this test your level of addiction can be described as severely dependent, moderately dependent, or minimally dependent. People who smoke within 30 minutes of waking are usually more severely addicted to nicotine than others.

Fagerstrom Test for Nicotine Dependence^a

How soon after you wake up do you smoke your first cigarette?	a. Within 5 minutes	3 Points
	b. Within 6-30 minutes.	2 Points
	c. Within 31-60 minutes	1 Point
	d. After 60 minutes	0 Points
Do you find it difficult to refrain from smoking in places where it is forbidden (e.g., in church, at the library, in cinema, etc)?	a. Yes	1 Point
	b. No	0 Points
Which cigarette would you hate most to give up?	a. The first one in the morning	1 Point
	b. Any other	0 Points
How many cigarettes per day do you smoke?	a. 10 or less	0 Points
	b. 11-20	1 Point
	c. 21-30	2 Points
	d. 31 or more	3 Points
Do you smoke more during the first hours after waking than during the rest of the day?	a. Yes	1 Point
	b. No	2 Points
Do you smoke even when you are ill enough to be in bed most of the day?	a. Yes	1 Point
	b. No	2 Points

Now add up your points. How did you score? _____ Points

A score of 5 or more indicates a significant dependence, while a score of 4 or less shows a low to moderate dependence

¹ <http://cde.drugabuse.gov/instrument/d7c0b0f5-b865-e4de-e040-bb89ad43202b>

Even with the best intentions, people who have moderate or severe nicotine addiction will have difficulty stopping tobacco use without help. A person who is nicotine dependent will usually need medical help and support in order to stop tobacco use and stay quit. There are medications that can help reduce symptoms of nicotine withdrawal and increase comfort while trying to stop smoking. Switching to "light" cigarettes or to e-cigarettes does not usually lead to quitting. (For more information on quitting smoking see the ATS Patient Information Series at www.thoracic.org/patients).

Aside from the physical addiction, many regular smokers report that smoking is part of their everyday routine. A person needs to make changes in their normal routine and that can be hard. But you can be successful. Think about when you smoke and what you are doing when you smoke. Try to do things differently or do things that don't remind you of smoking. For example, if you always smoke after a meal, try doing something else like clearing and washing the dishes or taking a walk.

It is best to talk to your healthcare provider about the safest and most effective ways to stop using tobacco and all nicotine containing products. Your healthcare provider can help you choose a treatment plan that may include medication, nicotine replacement products, and counseling to help keep you comfortable throughout the process of stopping smoking.

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Rx Action Steps

- ✓ Make a list of the risks of continued smoking and the rewards of quitting for you.
- ✓ Pay attention to your smoking pattern and whether you crave nicotine or have symptoms of withdrawal from nicotine.
- ✓ Talk to your health care provider about the most effective ways to manage your nicotine addiction.
- ✓ Set a goal date to stop smoking and stick to that date.
- ✓ Ask others to help support your efforts to quit using tobacco.
- ✓ For additional help in quitting, join a local quit smoking support group or call toll-free 1-800-QUIT-NOW in the US or 1-866-366-3667 in Canada).

Healthcare Provider's Contact Number:

Additional Resources:

National Cancer Institute
 BeTobaccoFree.gov
Easy to use information about smoking and how to stop.
<https://betobaccofree.hhs.gov>

American Lung Association
<http://www.lung.org/stop-smoking/>

Public Health England
<https://www.nhs.uk/smokefree>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. How Tobacco Smoke Causes Disease: The Biology and Behavioral Basis for Smoking-Attributable Disease: A Report of the Surgeon General Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, 2010.
<http://neuroscience.mssm.edu/nestler/brainRewardpathways.html>

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