

Breathe easier: Quit Smoking

Tobacco use and addiction continues to be a major problem in the United States. Most people who smoke know all the reasons why they should quit and a large majority of them even say things like “I really should quit. I want to quit. I don’t know how.” Most smokers have attempted to quit at least once; it may take a few attempts to finally “kick the habit”.

Here are some things to think about that may help motivate you to think about quitting:

- Children who grow up in a smoking household are much more likely to become smokers than children growing up in non-smoking households.
- Quitting smoking reduces or eliminates the risks of passive-smoking induced diseases in children including respiratory infections and middle ear disease.
- The risks of large weight gains following quitting smoking are low. The average weight gain is 5 lbs. Evidence suggests that quitting smoking may also be related to favorable changes in body fat distribution.
- Former smokers have fewer days of being ill, fewer health complaints and better overall health status than current smokers.

There are several things you can do to begin the process of quitting smoking. First, you can decide if you want to quit cold turkey or if you need to ease yourself into quitting. Easing into quitting is sometimes called nicotine fading and is a process of reducing nicotine intake. Keep in mind that you aren’t helping your efforts if, in the fading process, you either smoke more cigarettes, inhale more deeply, or smoke further down on your cigarette than you normally would. Fading is a procedure to help you quit, not a way to smoke safely. There is no way to smoke without health risks.

In fading, you can use a method called brand switching where you change brands every week to two weeks to cigarettes that have lower levels of nicotine. You can also fade your nicotine intake through behavior changes in your smoking habit. Here are some tips for decreasing your smoking and preparing to quit altogether:

1. Delay tactics: Delay your first cigarette of the day by 15 minutes each day.
2. Placement: Keep your cigarettes in an inconvenient location (e.g., in the freezer). When you go to smoke, only take one cigarette at a time. If you typically smoke at work, try keeping your cigarettes in your car and only get one cigarette per smoke break. If you smoke in the car, keep your cigarettes in the trunk so you can’t automatically reach for one.
3. Location: Designate non-smoking areas for yourself (e.g., house, car, work) and gradually decrease the number of smoking locations.
4. Distraction: Keep your hands and mind busy. Rubbing stones or stress balls can alleviate some of the nervous energy. Use appropriate substitutions to avoid weight gain (e.g., cinnamon sticks or sugarless gum/candies).
5. Association: If you always smoke with your coffee, try changing coffee brands for awhile and don’t smoke then. If you associate smoking with after dinner, take a walk instead to break that chain of association.

Finally, you can quit cold turkey. Some research suggests this is a more healthful approach while other research suggests that decreasing nicotine intake can be a method to increase the success of quitting. Either way you begin to quit, you'll need to prepare yourself mentally as well. Keep in mind that you quit one day at a time. Urges to smoke will pass whether you smoke or not, and they only last a few minutes if you "surf the urge" until it's gone. Keep a positive attitude and enlist the help of friends and family.

Quitting is a process. Start by setting a quit date. At that day, get rid of your cigarettes and all your smoking paraphernalia (e.g., ashtrays, lighters). Try getting your teeth cleaned and your car detailed as a "fresh start". Remember there are two dependencies: physical and psychological. Addressing both increases your odds of successful quitting. Once you are under 10 mg. of nicotine a day, you have broken the physical addiction process and you are down to the psychological part. If you can determine where your triggers are and how you typically give yourself permission to "give into them", you are on your way to breaking the psychological addiction.

A final note. People usually say that nicotine relaxes them so they "need" a cigarette when they are under stress. Nicotine is a stimulant and does not in itself have any relaxing properties. The primary reason a cigarette helps a smoker feel relaxed is the break of usual activities and the deep breathing that can go along with inhaling. The good news is you can take breaks and deep breaths without cigarettes as a way to relax under stress. Good luck. It's a task worth undertaking.

This tip was written by Sonja Benson, Ph.D. Dr. Benson practices in Scottsdale, AZ. If you feel that speaking with a psychologist would be helpful to you, please contact AzPA for a referral. All rights reserved; to use any of this tip, please obtain permission from the author by contacting AzPA. Copyright © 3/2000 by Sonja Benson, Ph.D.