

Stopping Smoking and Nicotine Vaping: How to Cope with Cravings, Withdrawal, and Relapse

Stopping smoking or vaping nicotine can be hard. When you try to stop, you often get a strong desire to have a cigarette or vape, also known as a craving. You may also have feelings related to stopping the use of nicotine that are uncomfortable. These are known as withdrawal symptoms. These unpleasant feelings can lead you to start smoking or vaping nicotine again, or relapse.



Nicotine is a chemical that is found in different amounts in all tobacco products. It is also being used in most electronic delivery devices such as e-cigarettes.

Nicotine in tobacco products is addictive. You can feel a strong need to have nicotine, even if you have only tried tobacco products once or twice. You may experience cravings and withdrawal symptoms when you don't have it or are trying to stop using it. There is no level of nicotine in tobacco products that is safe. With help you can deal with nicotine cravings and withdrawal.

What is nicotine withdrawal?

Nicotine changes how the brain is wired, making the brain feel like it needs nicotine to work. After you stop using tobacco products, the process of the brain getting used to not having nicotine is called nicotine withdrawal. Withdrawal from nicotine can be uncomfortable and sometimes very severe.

Withdrawal is the strongest in the first week after stopping smoking or vaping. The first week after stopping is when people are at highest risk to start smoking or vaping nicotine again. Knowing what withdrawal symptoms to expect and learning how to manage them can help you break free from tobacco and nicotine vaping products.

What are the symptoms of nicotine withdrawal?

Symptoms of nicotine withdrawal are different for every smoker and can include:

- Cravings to smoke or vape
- Getting angry easily
- Feeling irritable or cranky
- Restlessness
- Depression

- Difficulty concentrating
- Finding it hard to feel pleasure
- Having a hard time sleeping
- Increased appetite or weight gain
- Chest tightness
- Constipation

What is nicotine craving?

For many people who stop using nicotine, cravings can last longer than other withdrawal symptoms. A nicotine craving is a powerful and intense urge or desire for nicotine. Usually it is strong and difficult to ignore and can happen without warning.

Sometimes a craving can be caused by something around you that triggers you to think about nicotine, like seeing someone else smoking or vaping, passing by the store where you usually purchase your nicotine products, or being around your friends who use tobacco or nicotine vaping products. Cravings usually last for 15-20 minutes. Nicotine replacement therapy can help reduce withdrawal symptoms and relieve cravings.

Can I avoid cravings and withdrawal when I stop tobacco or nicotine use?

The best way to reduce cravings and withdrawal is to plan ahead. Try to think about people and places that may trigger you wanting to use tobacco—you may want to avoid them for a while. Talk to your healthcare provider about using medications to help control withdrawal so that you can feel comfortable when not using tobacco or nicotine vaping products.

Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) can be helpful for dealing with withdrawal and managing cravings. NRT reduces withdrawal by giving you a small amount of

nicotine that helps reduce the urge to smoke or vape, without the other dangerous chemicals in tobacco products. This is also different than nicotine liquid used in products for vaping.

How can I manage nicotine cravings and withdrawal?

NRT and other cessation medications are helpful in reducing nicotine withdrawal, yet many people will still have some withdrawal symptoms even while on medications. Talk to your healthcare worker about combination therapy or trying a different medication. In addition to medications, some ways to reduce your cravings and withdrawal include:

- Deep Breathing: A simple deep breathing exercise can help you deal with tension and focus your mind.
- Delaying: Cravings may fade away in a few minutes. Try to wait it out.
- Drinking plenty of water or chewing gum. This may help decrease cravings.
- Using distraction: Doing something else. Find something else to do when you have the urge to smoke (exercise, shower, change your routine, work on a

hobby, etc.).

- Getting Support: Enlist a buddy to help you as you stop tobacco use. Call or text a friend when you are feeling a craving. Sometimes just talking about the challenges you are having will help you deal with withdrawal.
- Calling the Help Line. 1 800 QUIT NOW (1-800-784-8669) will connect you to your state's FREE tobacco dependence help line.
- Planning outings where tobacco use is not allowed, like the movies, the gym, or the library.
- Staying focused on your reasons for stopping tobacco use.
- Giving yourself a treat.
- Making a healthy snack.

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Rx Action Steps

Thinking about stopping smoking or vaping? Planning ahead can help you succeed. Consider these action steps before beginning your journey:

- ✓ Speak to your healthcare provider about ways to stop, including cessation medications.
- ✓ Find a support person who will help and encourage you through the process.
- ✓ Explore state quitlines, online programs, text messaging services, and chat rooms to get the help you need to achieve your goal.

What should I do if I start to smoke or vape nicotine again?

- ✓ Congratulate yourself that you were able to stop—even if for a short time. Most people take several tries before final success at stopping.
- ✓ Think about what you did that helped you to stop
- ✓ Think about what lead you back to using tobacco
- ✓ Use this experience to help in making plans for the next time you stop smoking or vaping nicotine.
- ✓ Talk to your healthcare provider about medications that you can use to make stopping easier.
- ✓ Don't knock the experience. Appreciate what you learned and use it as a lesson to put yourself in much better shape for the next time you stop.

Healthcare Provider's Contact Number:

Resources:

National Cancer Institute

- 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669)
 - toll-free number operated by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) that will connect you directly to your state's tobacco quitline
- 1-877-44U-QUIT
 - The National Cancer Institute's trained counselors are available to provide information and help with quitting in English or Spanish, Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 8:00 pm ET
- SmokeFree.Gov
 - This website from the National Cancer Institute provides a wealth of information on how to stop smoking.
- <https://livehelp.cancer.gov>
 - This site provides live, online assistance from the NCI's LiveHelp service Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 8:00 pm ET

American Cancer Society

- 1-866-QUIT-4-LIFE (1-866-784-8454)
- <https://www.quitnow.net>
 - Program provides online and texting assistance and quit plan

CDC

- <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/partners/health/hcp/index.html>
 - This website from CDC provides a wealth of information for patients and providers on how to stop smoking.

American Thoracic Society

- www.thoracic.org/patients

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