

Smoking and women's health

How does smoking affect my body?

When you smoke, poisons from tobacco smoke pass through your lungs and into your bloodstream. They are carried around your body and interfere with the way it works.¹

Every puff you take on a cigarette increases the amount of toxic carbon monoxide in your bloodstream, which takes the place of oxygen in your blood. The nicotine in the smoke immediately increases your heart rate and blood pressure. It causes your small blood vessels to narrow, reducing blood flow. All these actions together cause great stress to your body, especially your heart.²

Over time, smoking starts to take its toll on your body. It affects your immune system, interferes with your lungs' cleaning system, reduces blood flow to your hands and feet, and hardens your arteries.¹



What diseases does smoking cause?

Smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and lung diseases such as emphysema and chronic bronchitis.^{1, 3} Smoking causes at least 16 different cancers, including cancer of the ovaries and the cervix.^{1, 3, 4} Smoking may also increase your risk for breast cancer.^{3, 5} Lung cancer is the most common cause of cancer death in women, and most lung cancers are caused by smoking.^{6, 7}

Problems caused by smoking can be painful, crippling and long lasting. Smoking causes blindness, gum disease, loss of bone density, hip fractures, rheumatoid arthritis and peptic ulcers.^{1, 3} Smoking is a major risk factor for peripheral vascular disease (PVD) which is a narrowing of the arteries in the legs that lead to blockage and pain.^{3, 8}

The earlier you stop smoking, the more you reduce your risk of serious illness and early death.^{1, 2, 9}



The contraceptive pill

The pill is safe, effective and the most widely used form of contraception.¹⁰⁻¹³

However, if you smoke and take the ‘combined’ pill (which contains oestrogen) you have a greater risk of suffering a heart attack, stroke or blood clots.¹⁴⁻¹⁹ This risk affects women older than 35 years and rises with age. Your risk also increases with the number of cigarettes you smoke per day.^{12, 14, 15, 17, 19-21} Newer “lower dose” versions of the pill may still increase heart disease risk, although more research is needed to confirm this.²² Stopping smoking greatly reduces your risk.⁹

Fertility

If you smoke, you may find it more difficult to become pregnant.^{1, 2, 22} If you stop smoking, you should find it easier to conceive.^{23, 24}

In men, smoking causes problems with getting or maintaining an erection, due to the effects of smoking on the blood vessels of the penis.³ Smoking can also damage sperm.² Stopping smoking can help prevent these problems.³

Smoking in either partner reduces the chance that fertility treatments such as IVF will work.^{1, 25, 26} Stopping smoking is strongly recommended for both men and women undergoing fertility treatment.^{22, 27}

Your period

If you smoke, you have a greater risk of painful periods. You also have a higher risk of premenstrual syndrome, which includes headaches, bloating and poor mood.^{2, 22}

Menopause

Women who smoke reach menopause one or two years earlier than women who don’t smoke.² This may be due to the toxic effect of chemicals from smoke on your ovaries and the effects of nicotine on sex hormones.^{2, 28} Women who smoke may also have more menopausal symptoms such as night sweats and hot flushes.^{2, 22, 29} Menopause tends to

start later with less severe symptoms in women who have quit compared to women who keep smoking.^{23, 30}

Smoking leads to loss of bone density as women age and increases the risk of hip fractures. Stopping smoking as early as possible will reduce your risk.^{1, 31}

Pregnancy

Stopping smoking before or early on in your pregnancy is best. But quitting at any time gives your baby a better chance of a healthy start to life.

If you smoke when you are pregnant the toxic chemicals in cigarette smoke interfere with your placenta and reduce the oxygen level in your blood. This makes it harder for your baby to get the oxygen and food it needs to grow.² After smoking a cigarette, your baby is less able to move normally for at least an hour.³² Smoking places stress on the baby's heart and affects the development of their lungs and brain.²

Pregnant women who smoke have a greater risk of miscarriage, pregnancy complications and pre-term (early) birth. Smoking increases the risk of having a low weight baby, making the baby more likely to get an infection or other health problems. While the death of a baby is rare, smoking during pregnancy can cause sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI) and can increase the chance of a baby dying at, or shortly after, birth.^{1, 2} Smoking while pregnant also increases the child's risk of birth defects, and for being overweight or obese in childhood.^{3, 26, 33}

If you stop smoking before becoming pregnant or early in your pregnancy, your risk of having a baby with an unhealthy low birthweight drops to close to that of a someone who doesn't smoke.^{1, 34} Also, you reduce the risk of an early birth.^{34, 35} If you stop smoking later in your pregnancy you can still reduce some of the harms to your baby from tobacco.^{34, 36-38}

Breastfeeding

If you can breastfeed you are giving your baby a healthy start in life. Talk with your maternity care team about what feeding is right for you.

Breast milk provides all the food your baby needs for the first six months of life, and is the most important part of their diet for the first year.³⁹ Breastfeeding helps to protect babies against infections, illnesses of the gut and lungs, and illnesses caused by secondhand smoke such as middle ear disease.⁴⁰ Children who are breastfed have, on average, higher intelligence and are more likely to have straight teeth.⁴¹

If you choose to breastfeed, you can help protect your baby's health by not smoking.

- If you smoke, you pass on nicotine and other poisons from cigarette smoke to your baby through your breast milk.⁴⁰
- Smoking reduces the quality of breast milk and increases your baby's risk of a range of health problems such as colic and disrupted sleep patterns.⁴⁰
- Women who smoke tend to produce less milk and are more likely to wean their babies earlier.⁴² Their babies may have more problems suckling.^{42, 43}
- By not smoking you may help your baby breathe and sleep better.⁴²
- By not smoking you will cut down your baby's exposure to tobacco smoke in the air or on your clothes, skin and hair, which will help protect your child's health.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶

If you are finding it hard to stop smoking, you still protect your baby by breastfeeding, especially against chest and ear infections. To reduce harm to your baby:

- Try not to smoke before or during feeds. To give your body the longest time possible to get rid of nicotine from your breastmilk, breastfeed your baby first, then have your cigarette soon after. Do the same if you are using the nicotine lozenge, mouth spray, gum or inhalator to quit.
- Don't smoke near your baby – go outdoors to smoke. If you can't give it up altogether, accept that for now, but keep working on it.



Parenting

Every time you smoke and you're with children, they are smoking too. When exposed to cigarette smoke, babies and children have a greater risk of becoming sick from:

- chest infections such as pneumonia, bronchitis and bronchiolitis
- sudden unexplained death in infancy (SUDI or cot death)
- asthma
- weaker lungs and inflamed sinuses
- respiratory symptoms such as cough, phlegm, wheeze and shortness of breath
- meningococcal disease⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹

- middle ear disease or 'glue ear', which is a common may cause of hearing loss in children.^{44, 50}

The best way to protect children from tobacco smoke is to stop smoking.^{51, 52} The next best option is to always smoke outdoors after closing doors and windows, and to smoke away from others, especially children, when outdoors.⁵³⁻⁵⁷

Children learn from you and copy what they see. If you have children and don't want them to smoke, quitting can reduce the chances that they will take up smoking.^{58, 59} If you cannot quit yet, it helps to let them know that you would prefer they didn't smoke and why.

Weight and stopping smoking

If you smoke, the best thing you can do for your health is to quit.⁶⁰

Weight gain is not always a part of quitting, but it can occur in the first few months after stopping smoking.⁶¹ This may be because:

- without nicotine your body has lower energy demands and needs less food^{62, 63}
- you may feel more hungry due to nicotine withdrawal.^{63, 64}

If you do put on weight, try not to be discouraged. By stopping smoking you're doing great things for your health.

Making small changes every week can be easier and longer lasting than trying to make a lot of changes at once. These could include:

- Think of ideas for comforts and rewards that are not food based, like music, flowers, a day out, your favourite TV show, playing with a pet, doing a hobby, or a hot drink like herbal tea.
- Remove or reduce ultra-processed snacks (e.g. chips, biscuits, lollies, soft drink) in the pantry or fridge. If that's not possible, try to put them out of sight.
- Plan your meals and snacks ahead of time. Prepare some healthy snacks: whole fruits (not fruit juice), baked beans, nuts, and celery and carrot sticks or vegetable strips with hommus or peanut butter. Drink water.

If worrying about weight gain is stopping you from quitting, getting some support is a very good idea.

Talk to a health professional who can give you advice. They can help you make a healthy eating and exercise plan that suits you. Ask about what ongoing support they can offer. Your doctor can also refer you to a dietitian or other specialist.

For tips about healthy eating and tasty recipes, visit LiveLighter at livelighter.com.au.



Help to stop smoking

The best way to **stop smoking** is to talk with Quitline and use stop smoking medications. These include prescribed tablets or [nicotine patches, lozenges, mouth spray, inhalator or gum](#). Your doctor or pharmacist can advise you on what would suit you.

If you are taking any medicines, talk with your doctor or pharmacist as they may need to look at your medicines before you stop smoking.

Contact Quitline

Quitline is a welcoming, free and confidential counselling service. Quitline counsellors are experts at helping you gain the skills to break free from smoking or vaping, or both. We will help you build and keep up your motivation to quit and help you create a quit plan that works for you. We listen carefully and answer your questions without judgement and can support you throughout your quit journey. Quitline counsellors can also support you if you are using vapes to stop smoking and can help you stop vaping.

There are many ways to contact Quitline:

- **Call 13 7848** Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm
- **Text 'call back' to 0482 090 634** (VIC, SA, WA, NT only)
- **Webchat** at quit.org.au (VIC, SA, WA, NT only)
- **Facebook Messenger @quitvic** or **WhatsApp 61 385 832 920** (VIC, SA, WA, NT only)
- Ask Quitline to call you back **for free** at quit.org.au/callback

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can call Quitline and ask to yarn with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Quitline Counsellor if they wish, for Culturally sensitive support, delivered by mob, for mob.

Quitline has worked with people in the LGBTIQ+ community to make Quitline a safe and inclusive space. You can speak to Quitline in a language other than English: call 13 7848 and tell us you need an interpreter and we will call you back. We also use the National Relay Service with people with a hearing or speech impairment.

Go online: quit.org.au

Create your own quit plan to stop smoking or vaping with easy-to-find information. You'll find tips, distractions, tools and stories from people who quit.

Please note: this information is for general use only. Please consult your health professional for further advice.

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