

Smoking & 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 the most effective and widely used form of contraception. It is safe and even benefits the health of women who do not smoke.^{10, 11}

However, if you smoke and take the 'combined' pill (which contains oestrogen) you have a much greater risk of suffering a heart attack, stroke or blood clots.¹²⁻¹⁴ This risk exists by your mid-thirties and rises as you get older.^{11, 15} Your risk also increases with the number of cigarettes you smoke per day.^{11-13, 15, 16} Newer "lower dose" versions of the pill may still increase heart disease risk, although more research is needed to measure this risk.¹⁷ Stopping smoking greatly reduces your risk.⁹

Fertility

If you smoke, you may find it more difficult to become pregnant.^{1, 2} If you stop smoking, you should find it easier to conceive.^{18, 19}

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 reduces the chance that fertility treatments such as IVF will work.^{1, 20, 21} Stopping smoking is strongly recommended for both men and women undergoing fertility treatment.^{17, 22}

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 moodiness.^{2, 17}

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, 23} Women who smoke may also have more menopausal symptoms such as night sweats and hot flashes.^{2, 17, 24} Menopause tends to start later with less severe symptoms in women who have quit compared to women who keep smoking.^{18, 25}

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, 26}

Pregnancy

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.²⁷ 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 infant death syndrome (SIDS) 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, 21, 28}

If you stop smoking before becoming pregnant or early in your pregnancy, your baby's birthweight will be the same as someone who doesn't smoke.^{1, 29} Also, you reduce the risk of an early birth.^{29, 30}

Planning to stop smoking as early as you can means a better start to life for your baby.

Breastfeeding

If you breastfeed you are giving your baby a healthy start in life.

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.³¹

As a breastfeeding mother, you have some control over your own and your baby's environment by not smoking and limiting your alcohol intake.

If you breastfeed and smoke it's not ideal, but it is better than not breastfeeding.^{32, 33}

Women who smoke tend to produce less milk and are more likely to wean their babies earlier.³³

Breastfeeding helps to protect babies against infections, illnesses of the gut and lungs, and illnesses caused by secondhand smoke. But smoking reduces these protective qualities of breast milk and may also affect normal suckling by the baby. Babies of mothers who smoke are more likely to have gut upsets, sleeping disorders and heart disorders.³⁴ Despite this, breastfeeding is still considered better than bottle feeding for women who smoke.³³

If you stop smoking, you will no longer be passing on nicotine and other poisons from cigarette smoke to your baby through your breast milk. You will likely help your baby to sleep and breathe better.³³ You will also cut down your baby's exposure to tobacco smoke, which will help protect your child's health.^{27, 34}

If you are having difficulty stopping smoking, you can still help to reduce harm to your baby. Consider every cigarette and decide whether it's worth it to you. Try not to smoke before or during feeds. Also 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 young children have a greater risk of becoming sick from:

- bronchitis and bronchiolitis
- pneumonia,
- sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS or cot death).
- asthma,
- weaker lungs and inflamed sinuses,
- meningococcal disease³⁵⁻³⁷
- 'glue ear' (an ear infection that may cause hearing loss).^{27, 38}

The best way to protect children from tobacco smoke is to stop smoking.^{39, 40} The next best way is with a *total* ban on smoking inside the home and car.^{41, 42}

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.⁴³ 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

Some women may gain weight when they stop smoking.⁴⁴ If you are concerned about weight gain, there are steps you can take to help manage your weight.

If you do put on weight, try not to be too hard on yourself. By stopping smoking you are doing great things for your health.⁴⁵ You would have to gain over 40 kilograms above your recommended weight to equal the risk of heart disease posed by smoking.⁴⁶

The average weight gain over five years of people that stop smoking is about three kilograms more than people who keep smoking.⁴⁵ However, different people tend to gain different amounts of weight when stopping smoking, so it's a good idea to get the right help for you, if you feel you need it.⁴⁴

It's not fully understood why people may gain weight after stopping smoking. However, it is related to:

- eating more: your appetite tends to increase in the weeks after you stop smoking^{47, 48}
- your body needs less energy (that means fewer calories from food) to function when resting^{47, 49}
- doing little exercise.⁴⁵

Weight gain tends to happen more in the first three months after stopping smoking and then slow down after that. If you gain more than one kilogram in the first month then it's a good idea to chat to your doctor.⁵⁰

If worrying about weight gain is stopping you from quitting, talk to a health professional who can give you advice. They can help you make a healthy eating and exercise plan that suits you. Your doctor can also refer you to a dietician or other specialist. More tips to help manage your weight are in Quit's free Quit Pack or on the Quit website www.quit.org.au.

Tips to help manage your weight

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

Plan your meals and snacks ahead of time.

- Use the time and money you've saved from not smoking to plan and cook tasty, healthy meals.
- Get rid of or cut down on processed foods in your pantry or fridge (e.g. soft drinks, chips, biscuits, lollies, cakes). Avoid or limit deep fried food.
- Buy or prepare some healthy snacks, such as carrot and celery sticks, whole fruits (not fruit juice), nuts and baked beans.
- Do some exercise you enjoy.

If you need ideas for healthy meals and snacks you might like to try the free Liveliighter Meal Plan at www.liveliighter.com.au.

Help to stop smoking

For your best chance of stopping smoking, talk with a health professional who is trained to help people quit (such as Quitline) and use stop smoking medications.^{51, 52}

Your doctor or pharmacist can talk with you about which stop smoking medications would suit you best. These include prescribed stop smoking tablets or nicotine patches, lozenges, mouth spray, gum and inhalator. The nicotine patch, lozenge and gum and prescribed tablets are cheaper with a script from your doctor. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, talk to your doctor before using any medications to stop smoking.

Call the Quitline 13 7848

What is Quitline?

Quitline is a free telephone support service that works with you to help you stop smoking. Your Quitline counsellor is trained to listen carefully and give support suited to your needs. We care about your story and do not judge. We can help you before and after you stop smoking. We can also talk to you about the different types of stop smoking medications. Your call is private and confidential. You can call the Quitline for the usual cost of a local call from your phone or ask us to call you at no cost (Quitline callback).

Quitline is an inclusive and culturally safe space for all, including the LGBTIQ+ community. An interpreter service is available for people who speak a language other than English.

There is also an Aboriginal Quitline for people who smoke and identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Simply call 13 7848 and ask to speak with one of our qualified Aboriginal Quitline counsellors.

Go online

www.quit.org.au

Build your personal quit plan with easy-to-find information suited to you. You'll find tips, distractions, a tool that adds up the money you'll save and stories from people who have quit.

QuitCoach: www.quitcoach.org.au

The QuitCoach is a free online program that asks you questions and then gives you ideas and suggestions that will be most useful to you. QuitCoach can help you before and after you stop smoking.

QuitTxt

QuitTxt sends regular SMS messages including tips and encouragement to help you keep on track as you make changes. To begin, all you need to do is answer a few questions at www.quit.org.au/quittxt.

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