

Smoking and withdrawal

Stopping smoking is different for everyone. Some people find it easy to quit, others don't. However, there are some signs and symptoms that many people have in common when they stop smoking.¹⁻³

What are withdrawal symptoms?

Withdrawal symptoms are a collection of changes in your mood and body that usually appear when you stop smoking.^{1, 2}

You may have symptoms because you are no longer getting nicotine, the addictive drug in tobacco.^{1, 2} Nicotine in other forms, such as nicotine patches, gum, lozenges, mouth spray or inhalator, can reduce the strength of withdrawal symptoms.¹

Common symptoms of withdrawal are¹⁻⁴:

- Urges to smoke (cravings)
- Changes to sleeping patterns
- Being easily upset: feeling irritable, frustrated, or angry
- Feeling depressed or anxious
- Finding it harder to concentrate
- Feeling restless
- Wanting to eat more or weight gain

Some people have other symptoms that might also be due to stopping smoking:

- Feeling less interested in rewarding activities⁵
- Coughing³ and possibly other cold symptoms (sneezing, temporary deafness)⁶
- Mouth ulcers^{3, 6}
- Upset bowel, such as finding it harder to pass poo^{3, 7}
- Mood swings⁸
- Dizziness³
- Increased dreaming³

Coughing before and after stopping smoking is common, but this usually decreases over one to two months after quitting.^{9, 10} Mouth ulcers and bowel symptoms seem to only affect a small number of people.^{6, 7}

It's common for people to have at least a few withdrawal symptoms when they stop smoking.¹¹ Many people only have mild symptoms, but some have more severe symptoms.¹¹

Some people also report positive effects from stopping smoking, such as feeling more satisfied, and a better sense of smell and taste.^{8, 12}

How long do feelings of withdrawal last?

Feelings of withdrawal usually appear within the first one to two days and are strongest in the first week. For many people, most feelings of withdrawal fade and are gone after about two to four weeks.³

Of course, on top of these symptoms are life's usual emotional ups and downs. These moments can be hard when you're trying to avoid falling back on your usual response of having a cigarette. Many people find withdrawal a "bumpy ride".¹³

Not all people follow this pattern. Instead, their symptoms either fall then rise a few weeks later, or they do not go away for several weeks.^{3, 13} This can be due to people getting triggers to smoke from routines and happenings in their day-to-day life, which can make feelings of withdrawal seem worse.¹⁴ In some cases, people may also start feeling tired from the effort of being on the look-out for and resisting cravings.¹⁴ If you feel this happening to you, support is available from your Quitline counsellor (13 7848).

The good news is that studies show that people's mental well-being tends to improve within six months after stopping smoking. Compared to people who keep smoking, people who stop may have fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress, and feel more cheerful and energized. By stopping smoking you're not likely to worsen your mood in the long-term, whether you are living with a mental health condition or not.¹⁵

An increase in appetite may last for six months or more in some people.^{1, 16} Many people gain some weight when they stop smoking, which tends to happen in the first three months after stopping smoking then it slows down after that.^{17, 18} In the long term, the average weight of people who have stopped smoking is similar to people who have never smoked.¹⁷

Cravings

Most people have strong and frequent cravings (the urge or desire to smoke) in the first days after they stop smoking.¹⁹ After about a month, strong cravings tend to happen less often, and not every day.²⁰

Cravings can be due to nicotine withdrawal.¹ However, a desire to smoke can also be triggered by things that you've learned to link with smoking, much like seeing or smelling tasty food can make you feel hungry.^{14, 19, 21, 22}

Triggers can be quite varied.^{21, 22} For example, they can be linked to places where you normally smoked, people who you usually smoked with, and being near other people smoking. Habits or routines such as smoking after meals, drinking coffee or alcohol, or talking on the telephone may bring on cravings. A lot of people feel the urge to smoke when they feel angry, stressed, bored, tense or happy; or when they want to relax. Often, it's a combination of where you are, what you're doing and how you're feeling that create a strong urge to smoke.^{14, 21}

If you have habits strongly linked to smoking or you smoke to lift your mood, being confronted by these triggers after you stop may make your cravings and feelings of withdrawal seem worse.²³ Planning what to do in these situations instead of smoking, plus using stop smoking medications to reduce withdrawal symptoms, can help you stay quit.^{21, 24, 25} As you become used to doing other things, these urges to smoke tend not to happen as often and be less strong.^{22, 26}

Some people have occasional urges to smoke long after other withdrawal symptoms have gone.^{14, 26} If this happens to you, try not to be disheartened. Even though you've decided that you want to stop smoking for good, there may be times when you still have a desire to smoke. Remind yourself why you want to quit, think how far you've come and what you've gained.

Coping with feelings of withdrawal

Here are some top tips, but there are many more. Your friendly Quitline counsellor can give you support best suited to your needs or visit our website quit.org.au.

Your body's response to being without nicotine

- Prescribed stop smoking tablets and the nicotine patch, lozenges, mouth spray, gum and inhalator can help reduce feelings of withdrawal. Together with calling the Quitline, they increase your chances of stopping smoking for good.²⁷ If you want to use prescribed tablets you must talk with your doctor as they are not suitable for everyone.^{28, 29} Prescribed tablets and nicotine patches, lozenges and gum are much cheaper with a script from your doctor.³⁰ Nicotine replacement therapy is also sold over-the-counter at pharmacies and some supermarkets.
- **Before you stop smoking:** Chemicals in tobacco smoke can affect how well some medicines work. These includes medicines for mental health conditions, heart disease and some other conditions.^{31, 32} If you are taking any medicines, talk with your doctor before stopping smoking.

- Caffeine (for example in coffee, tea, chocolate and cola soft drinks) and alcohol are also affected by tobacco smoke.^{31, 33} Cutting down on drinks or foods with caffeine when you stop smoking is recommended. It's important to talk with your doctor before stopping smoking if you drink alcohol.

Looking after your body and mind

- If you are living with depression, anxiety or other mental health condition, it is best to see your doctor **before you stop smoking**. With the right support, many people with a mental health condition have stopped smoking, and they mostly feel a lot better, both in body and mind.¹⁵
- If you are concerned about weight gain, talk with a doctor or dietician, who can help you make an eating plan suited for you. Plan healthy meals and snacks ahead of time. Get rid of or cut down on processed foods in your home (e.g. soft drinks, chips, biscuits, lollies, cakes). For more information go to quit.org.au or call the Quitline 13 7848.
- Doing regular exercise you enjoy can reduce anxiety, help your mood, improve the quality of your sleep, and lower blood pressure.³⁴ It can also help reduce weight gain in the months and years after you stop smoking.³⁵ If you are not fit, start with some light exercise only and talk with your doctor or an exercise therapist.³⁶
- Doing something about managing situations in your life that make you feel tense or frustrated may help you cope better with withdrawal.³⁷ Try the exercise "Doing something about stress" in our booklet [Quit because you can](#) or talk about it with your Quitline counsellor on 13 7848.

Triggers to smoke

- Try to resist smoking "just one" cigarette. People who smoke from time to time after stopping smoking report having worse feelings of withdrawal.¹³ A cigarette now and then commonly leads to going back to regular smoking.³⁸
- If you can, make your home and car totally smokefree.³⁹ Get rid of any cigarettes, lighters and ashtrays.⁴⁰
- You need to understand why you smoke in order to plan how to cope without cigarettes when you stop smoking. You may need to change your behaviour or avoid situations that trigger urges to smoke for a little while.

- People who are most successful at resisting the urge to smoke use a range of coping strategies to help them.²¹ Call the Quitline or go to quit.org.au for ideas on topics such as living with a person who smokes, smoking and alcohol, managing stress, and many other situations.
- You might not feel like doing much in the first week or so, but this feeling should pass with time.⁵ When you're ready, try doing activities which give you pleasure and a sense of well-being, such as getting involved in new or favourite hobbies, reading, or spending more time with friends and family. Perhaps relax by doing deep breathing exercises, listening to music, walking in the park, or taking dancing or exercise classes.

Staying positive

- Remember the good things that are happening to your body as well. Now that you have stopped smoking, your body can start to heal and reverse the damage from smoking.^{10, 41}
- Keep encouraging yourself to stick to your decision to stop. Make a list of the good things about being a non-smoker. Give yourself a pat on the back for your daily successes, and reward yourself from time to time with the money you have saved.
- Remember, it's normal to have several goes at stopping smoking before you quit for good.⁴²

Here is one way to confront your cravings and overcome the urge to smoke.

Remember the 4Ds:

- **Delay** acting on the urge to open a pack and light a cigarette. After a few minutes, the urge to smoke weakens.
- **Deep breathe.** Take a long, slow breath, and let it out slowly. Repeat three times.
- **Do something else.** Take your mind off smoking by taking action: put on some music, keep your hands busy, go for a walk or ring a friend.
- **Drink water.** Sip it slowly, and hold it in your mouth to savour the taste.

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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