

PSYCHOLOGY WORKS Fact Sheet: Quitting Smoking

According to the Canadian Tobacco and Nicotine Survey (CTNS) published in 2022, about 3.5 million people in Canada smoke tobacco. A higher percentage of men (12.9%) than women (9.1%) reported current smoking. In 2022, the prevalence of current smoking among youth aged 15-19 was 4.2% or 89,000. In the same year, the prevalence of current cigarette smoking among young adults aged 20-24 was 7.7% or 185,000. The prevalence of current cigarettes smoking among Canadian adults aged 25 years and older was 11.7% or 3.2 million.¹ Smoking is a leading cause of illness and early death in Canada, reinforcing the need to bring this national smoking rate down even further to allow all Canadians to live longer, healthier lives.

Quitting smoking reduces your chances of developing many physical conditions (e.g., cancers, heart disease, respiratory diseases). Quitting smoking also has a lot of mental health benefits. Compared with those who continue to smoke, people who quit smoking experience the following benefits for many years after quitting: less stress and anxiety; fewer symptoms of depression; more frequent positive emotions; higher overall quality of life; and feeling healthier in general.

Why is Smoking So Addictive?

Nicotine is the major addictive chemical in cigarette smoke and acts very quickly in your body, reaching your brain in about 10-20 seconds. Within about 2 hours of finishing your cigarette, nicotine levels in your body drop by 50%. This leads to cravings, feeling anxious or irritable, and generally feeling 'down.'

Nicotine affects a number of important chemicals in your brain and body, which can change your mood, make you feel energized, and even reduce pain. However, these effects are short-lived and most common in new or occasional smokers. This is because your body adapts to these changes over time, resulting in a need to smoke more over time in order to feel any of these effects – or just feel 'normal.'

Although nicotine is very addictive, it's not the only reason why people have trouble quitting. Lighting up a cigarette is often part of a routine. Whether you smoke after dinner, on work breaks, or when socializing, smoking in response to daily triggers can make it more difficult to quit.

What Treatments Are Available?

Quitting smoking involves managing the physical symptoms and breaking the links between smoking and how you feel, what you do, with whom you spend time, and how you see yourself. As a result, it often takes many attempts, and many treatment types, before you're able to quit successfully.

¹ Health Canada. (2022). *Canadian tobacco and nicotine survey*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/canadian-tobacco-nicotine-survey/2022-summary.html>



Quitting “cold turkey” is one of the most common approaches, but it’s also one of the least effective. A number of treatments are proven to help make your attempt to quit a success:

1. **Behavioural Therapy:** These treatments target the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that support an addiction. Common therapies include cognitive behavioural therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and functional analytic therapy.
2. **Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT):** NRT comes in two forms: slow release (e.g., nicotine patch) and rapid-delivery (e.g., nicotine gum, inhalers, sprays, patches, lozenges). NRTs help to reduce cravings and withdrawal symptoms by releasing small amounts of nicotine into your body, but are not addictive.
3. **Prescription Medication:** In Canada, two major prescription drugs are used to help people quit smoking: varenicline and bupropion. These drugs affect nicotine receptors in your brain and help to reduce cravings and withdrawal symptoms. Varenicline also helps to make smoking less pleasurable.

Note: You should always consult a doctor for information on the risk of side-effects or interactions before using NRTs or prescription medications.

What Works?

Varenicline is the most effective on its own, but all three types of treatment work. While using at least one of these treatments can boost your odds of successfully quitting by as much as 80%, research shows that the best way to quit is by combining treatments. The two most successful combinations are:

- **Combined NRTs**, which involve using a combination of a slow-release NRT (e.g., nicotine patch) and a rapid-delivery form (e.g., nicotine inhaler).
- **Combined Pharmacotherapy and Behavioural Therapy.** You can boost your chances of quitting by using pharmacotherapy (i.e., NRT or prescription drugs) while getting help to quit from a licensed mental health professional (e.g., registered psychologist).

Quit-lines and online help, whether on their own or combined with other treatments, can also increase your likelihood of staying smoke-free.

What Doesn't Work?

Aversion therapies (e.g., smoking until you feel sick), substituting alternative tobacco products (e.g., chewing tobacco, snuff), and alternative therapies (e.g., hypnotherapy, acupuncture, and natural herbs and remedies) don't improve your odds of quitting.

What About E-Cigarettes?

E-cigarettes containing nicotine appear to help some people stop smoking traditional combustible tobacco products; however, higher quality research is still needed before widely recommending e-



cigarettes for smoking cessation.² It is also important to note that switching to e-cigarettes is considered a *harm reduction approach*, but still has negative health effects compared to stopping all tobacco use.³

How Can I Help Myself Quit?

Whatever route you choose, keep in mind that it can be *incredibly* difficult to quit smoking. Even if it takes you many tries, you can eventually succeed.

Whether it's your first attempt or your fifth, psychological research shows that there is much you can do to make your quit attempt a success:

- Set concrete and realistic goals (e.g., set a specific 'quit date').
- Start using treatments before you quit.
- Tell your friends and family that you're quitting and let them know how they can help.
- Embrace change in your daily routine, social circle, and motivations.
- Find a buddy who is also trying to quit.
- Gradually reduce your smoking before you quit.
- Start by reducing the amount you smoke.
- Reward yourself, even for small gains.
- Make a plan to deal with withdrawal symptoms (e.g., headaches, sadness, irritability, anxiety) in the first 1-4 weeks after quitting. These are signs that your body is recovering.
- Follow the 4 Ds to help deal with cravings: **D**istract yourself, **D**rink water, take **D**eep breaths, and **D**elay smoking for as long as possible.
- Get active.
- Keep your focus on what you don't enjoy about smoking rather than what you enjoy.
- Forgive yourself if you have the occasional cigarette.
- Keep yourself busy.
- Understand your triggers and learn how to manage them.
- Replace cigarettes with other things, activities, and people that you enjoy.
- Re-identify yourself as a "non-smoker" or "former smoker" to your friends, family, co-workers, and yourself.
- Accept that this will be difficult for a while, but the rewards will last a lifetime.

² Levett, J. Y., Filion, K. B., Reynier, P., Prell, C., & Eisenberg, M. J. (2023). Efficacy and safety of e-cigarette use for smoking cessation: A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *The American Journal of Medicine*, 136(8), 804-813. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2023.04.014>

³ Sapru, S., Vardhan, M., Li, Q., Guo, Y., Li, X., & Saxena, D. (2020). E-cigarettes use in the United States: Reasons for use, perceptions, and effects on health. *BMC public health*, 20(1), Article 1518. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09572-x>



Where Can I Go For Help?

Your family doctor can help you to develop a plan for quitting, figure out which treatments might be most effective, and refer you to other health care professionals who can also help you quit smoking. Doctors can also advise you on the safety of NRTs and medications (e.g., side-effects, interactions).

Registered psychologists can help you develop a plan for quitting and provide therapy that will help you quit. Psychologists can offer a variety of effective therapies and will work with you to figure out which one is likely to work best for you. Check with [your provincial or territorial psychological association](#) to find a psychologist in your area who can help you quit smoking.

The Canadian Cancer Society offers a bilingual “Smokers’ Helpline” at 1-877-513-5333. Their telephone counsellors are trained to provide support and help you create a plan for quitting. For more information, visit their website: <https://smokershelpline.ca/>.

You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology may make available a referral list of practicing psychologists that can be searched for appropriate services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the **PSYCHOLOGY WORKS** Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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