

# AgePage

## Smoking: It's Never Too Late to Stop

*“I’ve smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for 40 years—what’s the use of quitting now? Will I even be able to quit after all this time?”*

It doesn’t matter how old you are or how long you’ve been smoking; quitting smoking at any time improves your health. When you quit, you are likely to add years to your life, breathe more easily, have more energy, and save money. You will also:

- Lower your risk of cancer, heart attack, stroke, and lung disease
- Have better blood circulation
- Improve your sense of taste and smell
- Stop smelling like smoke
- Set a healthy example for your children and grandchildren

Research supported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) confirms that even if you’re 60 or older and have been smoking for decades, quitting will improve your health.

Smoking shortens your life. It causes about 1 of every 5 deaths in the United States each year. Smoking makes millions of Americans sick by causing:

- **Lung disease.** Smoking damages your lungs and airways, sometimes causing chronic bronchitis. It can also cause emphysema, which destroys your lungs, making it very hard for you to breathe.
- **Heart disease.** Smoking increases your risk of heart attack and stroke.
- **Cancer.** Smoking can lead to cancer of the lungs, mouth, larynx (voice box), esophagus, stomach, liver, pancreas, kidneys, bladder, and cervix.
- **Respiratory problems.** If you smoke, you are more likely than a nonsmoker to get the flu, pneumonia, or other infections that can interfere with your breathing.

- **Osteoporosis.** If you smoke, your chance of developing osteoporosis (weak bones) is greater.
- **Eye diseases.** Smoking increases the risk of eye diseases that can lead to vision loss and blindness, including cataracts and age-related macular degeneration (AMD).
- **Diabetes.** Smokers are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes than nonsmokers, and smoking makes it harder to control diabetes once you have it. Diabetes is a serious disease that can lead to blindness, heart disease, nerve disease, kidney failure, and amputations.

Smoking can also make muscles tire easily, make wounds harder to heal, increase the risk of erectile dysfunction in men, and make skin become dull and wrinkled.

## Nicotine Is a Drug

Nicotine is the drug in tobacco that makes cigarettes so addictive. Although some people who give up smoking have no withdrawal symptoms, many people continue to have strong cravings for cigarettes. They also may feel grumpy, hungry, or tired. Some people have headaches, feel depressed, or have

problems sleeping or concentrating. These symptoms fade over time.

## Help with Quitting

Many people say the first step to quitting smoking successfully is to make a firm decision to quit and pick a definite date to stop. Make a plan to deal with the situations that trigger your urge to smoke and to cope with cravings. You may need to try many approaches to find what works best for you. For example, you might:

- Talk with your doctor.
- Read self-help information.
- Go to individual or group counseling.
- Download the mobile apps or sign up for the text messaging service at <https://60plus.smokefree.gov/resources/mobile-tools>.
- Ask a friend for help.
- Think of what you can do with the money you spend on cigarettes and set up a rewards system.
- Take a walk or try a new physical activity you enjoy.
- Take medicine to help with symptoms of nicotine withdrawal.

Some people worry about gaining weight if they quit. If that concerns

you, make a plan to exercise and be physically active when you quit—it may distract you from your cravings and is important for healthy aging.

## Breaking the Addiction

When you quit smoking, you may need support to cope with your body's desire for nicotine. Nicotine replacement products help some smokers quit. You can buy gum, patches, or lozenges over the counter.

There are also prescription medications that may help you quit. A nicotine nasal spray or inhaler can reduce withdrawal symptoms and make it easier for you to quit smoking.

Other drugs may also help with withdrawal symptoms. Talk with your doctor about which medicines might be best for you.

## Cigars, Pipes, Hookahs, Chewing Tobacco, and Snuff Are Not Safe

Some people think smokeless tobacco (chewing tobacco and snuff), pipes, and cigars are safe alternatives to cigarettes. They are not. Smokeless tobacco causes cancer of the mouth and pancreas. It also causes precancerous lesions (known as oral leukoplakia), gum

problems, and nicotine addiction. Pipe and cigar smokers may develop cancer of the mouth, lip, larynx, esophagus, and bladder. Those who inhale when smoking are also at increased risk of getting lung cancer as well as heart disease, chronic bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and emphysema. Using a hookah to smoke tobacco poses many of the same health risks as cigarette smoking.

## Secondhand Smoke Is Dangerous

Secondhand smoke created by cigarettes, cigars, and pipes can cause serious health problems for family, friends, and even pets of smokers. Secondhand smoke is especially dangerous for people who already have lung or heart disease. In adults, secondhand smoke can cause heart disease and lung cancer. In babies, it can increase the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), which is the unexplained death of a baby younger than 1 year of age. Children are also more likely to have lung problems, ear infections, and severe asthma if they are around secondhand smoke.

## Get the Facts About E-Cigarettes

Electronic cigarettes, or e-cigarettes, deliver nicotine, flavor, and other chemicals that are inhaled by the user. They are sometimes called “e-cigs,” “e-hookahs,” “mods,” “vape pens,” “vapes,” or “tank systems,” and may look like regular cigarettes, pens, or even USB sticks. They may contain harmful substances like lead and cancer-causing chemicals, in addition to nicotine, which is addictive. Some flavorings in e-cigarettes have been linked to lung disease. Scientists are still studying the long-term effects e-cigarettes may have on your health. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not approved e-cigarettes as a quit-smoking aid. There is limited evidence that they help smokers quit.

## Good News About Quitting

The good news is that after you quit smoking, even in your 60s, 70s, or beyond:

- Your heart rate and blood pressure drop to more normal levels.

- Your nerve endings begin to regenerate, so you can smell and taste better.
- Your lungs, heart, and circulatory system will begin to function better.
- You will cough and feel out of breath less often.
- Your chance of having a heart attack or stroke will drop.
- Your breathing will improve.
- Your chance of getting cancer will be lower.

No matter how old you are, all these health benefits are important reasons to make a plan to stop smoking.

## Call a Smoking Quitline

A trained counselor can help you stop smoking or stay on track. You can call:

- The National Cancer Institute’s Smoking Quitline, **1-877-448-7848 (1-877-44U-QUIT)**
- Smokefree.gov, which connects you with your State’s Quitline, **1-800-784-8669 (1-800-QUITNOW)**
- Veterans Smoking Quitline, **1-855-784-8838 (1-855-QUITVET)**

## You Can Quit Smoking: Stick with It!

Many people need a few tries before they quit smoking for good. If you slip and have a cigarette, you are not a failure. You can try again and be successful.

It's never too late to get benefits from quitting smoking. Quitting, even in later life, can significantly lower your risk of heart disease, stroke, and cancer over time and reduce your risk of death.

## For More Information About Quitting Smoking

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

1-800-232-4636 (toll-free)  
1-888-232-6348 (TTY/toll-free)  
cdcinfo@cdc.gov  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

### **MedlinePlus**

National Library of Medicine  
[www.medlineplus.gov/quittingsmoking.html](http://www.medlineplus.gov/quittingsmoking.html)

### **National Cancer Institute**

1-800-422-6237 (toll-free)  
cancergovstaff@mail.nih.gov  
[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

### **National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute**

1-301-592-8573  
nhlbiinfo@nhlbi.nih.gov  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

### **Smokefree60+**

National Cancer Institute  
1-877-448-7848  
(1-877-44U-QUIT/toll-free)  
cancergovstaff@mail.nih.gov  
[www.60plus.smokefree.gov](http://www.60plus.smokefree.gov)

For more information about health and aging, contact:

### **National Institute on Aging Information Center**

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)  
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)  
niaic@nia.nih.gov  
[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

Visit [www.nia.nih.gov/health](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health) to find more health and aging information from NIA and subscribe to email alerts. Visit <https://order.nia.nih.gov> to order free print publications.



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