

# Dealing with nicotine withdrawal

When you smoke, nicotine is quickly absorbed into your bloodstream and carried to your brain where it gives you the pleasant 'rush' you feel. While your mind enjoys the experience, your body doesn't, and reacts against it by producing chemicals that neutralise the effects of the nicotine. As time goes on, your body starts to expect the nicotine and starts releasing these chemicals before you smoke. If there's no nicotine in your bloodstream, you experience a craving (or a desire to smoke), because if you don't smoke, your body will be out of kilter. Heavy smokers can feel very uncomfortable in the days after they stop smoking. These feelings are called nicotine withdrawal.

A number of unpleasant experiences associated with nicotine withdrawal are common in the week or so after you quit. There are strategies that can reduce their unpleasantness, but you need to be prepared to put up with a bit of pain. However, if you think of this pain as the death throes of your addiction, it makes it much easier to bear.

If you are using stop smoking medication and get these symptoms, there can be two reasons: first, if you are using a nicotine replacement product you are either not using a high enough dose of nicotine, OR you might actually be getting too much nicotine. QuitCoach may have given you some advice as to which is most likely for you. If not, or if you are still uncertain, talk to your pharmacist about it.

If you are using prescription stop smoking medication, talk to your doctor if these symptoms are worrying you. The Stop Smoking Medication Advice Sheet has more information.

## RESTLESSNESS

Restlessness presents itself in a number of ways, the most common being unable to sit still, having to move about, or feeling as if you need to do something with your hands. These kinds of feelings are common in the week or two after quitting but generally disappear after a couple of weeks.

In some cases, restlessness can be brought on by drinking too much coffee, tea or cola – i.e., those drinks that contain caffeine. This is because nicotine helps break down caffeine. So, if after you quit you drink the same amount of coffee, or more, the caffeine may cause you to feel restless. It makes sense, therefore, to cut down on caffeine if you can.

If you are having problems with restlessness, then it's important to schedule physical activity into your day. Doing regular stretching exercises or going for a brisk walk or run can be useful. If much of the restlessness is in your hands, then get hold of some 'worry beads', squeeze a stress ball or play with some other object like a pen. If the problem is really severe and annoying, it may be helpful for you to use some nicotine replacement therapy.

## **IRRITABILITY AND BEING SHORT-TEMPERED**

Some smokers report becoming irritable and short-tempered in the days after quitting. It may be a good idea to warn those close to you that you might be a bit irritable, and ask for their forbearance. You are more likely to be irritable if you are feeling stressed. If possible, it is a good idea to try to reduce the amount of stress in your life during the first week or two after you quit - especially if you have experienced irritability in previous attempts. However, this may not always be possible, as sometimes unexpected or stressful events come up. In case this happens, you need to plan strategies in order to deal with them. If you are able to give these strategies a trial run before you quit, then your chances of coping well will be even better.

Deep breathing is one useful strategy. Slowly take in a deep breath, as deep as you can, and hold it for a couple of seconds. Slowly let the air flow out, and as you breathe out, feel the stress leaving your body. Two or three deep breaths over a minute or so can provide a reprieve and be a good circuit breaker if tension is building up. If this is not enough, take a 10 minute break, go for a walk or do something pleasant to take your mind off your problems. While you are doing this, think about what you are doing and what is going on around you, not why you are doing it (that is, keep your mind off the problem).

If people do things to annoy you, say "Please do not do that, it is getting on my nerves, you know, quitting and all that". This kind of request works best if you have warned people in advance, and if it occurs in the first week or two after you quit. There will come a time when people expect you to be back to normal. Research shows that ex-smokers report feeling less stressed than when they smoked, usually within a couple of months of quitting.

## **SLEEPING PROBLEMS**

It is quite common for smokers to report having trouble sleeping and having vivid, disturbing dreams in the days after quitting. If you have trouble with sleeping, or want to minimise your risk of doing so, the following strategies may help.

Too much caffeine is a major cause of insomnia, and once you quit smoking the effects of caffeine are almost doubled. Therefore, don't drink caffeine-containing substances like tea (excluding herbal teas), coffee and cola, from about mid-afternoon. And, if you normally drink large quantities, cut down by at least half.

Other strategies that may help include having a decaffeinated drink shortly before going to bed, reading, or doing something that distracts you for a few minutes before attempting to sleep. Once in bed with the lights out, try and stop your mind from thinking about problems and focus on imagining pleasant scenes. If you've tried all this and you still can't sleep, get out of bed and find something to do that occupies your thoughts. It really doesn't matter what it is, as long as it helps take your mind off not being able to sleep. Continue until you feel really tired then give bed/sleep another go.

Periods of insomnia are unlikely to last. Once your body gets used to not having nicotine, things will get better. Even if you can't sleep, don't panic. Research shows that a night spent with long periods lying awake provides much of the benefit of a night's sleep, even if it doesn't feel like it at the time. If a sleep problem persists beyond a few days, and you are sufficiently concerned, you can talk to your doctor about other solutions.

## CONCENTRATION

The physiological changes happening in your body, the cravings, and the vague feelings of discomfort can all contribute to problems with concentration. For some people, this can be a major problem for the first weeks after quitting, and it can persist if something isn't done to resolve it.

There are a number of strategies to deal with this problem, and it's good to know that many of them are worth trying whether you are quitting or not, as they can help improve your productivity.

- Take regular breaks, and do something active in your breaks. Go for a walk, do some exercises or chat to a friend. Keep the breaks short, often 2-3 minutes is all you need - if you are taking frequent breaks, you cannot afford to take 10 minutes every time.

- Drink lots of water or other decaffeinated, low-calorie drinks. Apart from helping to flush out the toxins from your system, this will keep you hydrated and help with your concentration.
- Reorganising your work can also help. Try to do the complex tasks when you are fresh. If you break your work up into smaller chunks so that each bit requires less effort you'll be able to complete it before your concentration starts to wander.

If you are working on something as part of a team, reorganise your schedules to have shorter, more frequent meetings, each with a single focus.