

Nicotine Dependence

What is nicotine?

Nicotine is a chemical in cigarettes, smokeless (chewing) tobacco, pipe tobacco, and cigars. It is both a stimulant and a sedative. It causes both psychological and strong physical addiction.

What is nicotine dependence?

Nicotine causes both psychological and physical dependence. Psychological dependence means that you have a strong emotional need for the drug nicotine. You feel that you need nicotine to function normally. Physical dependence on nicotine (addiction to nicotine) means that your body has to have some nicotine in order to prevent the symptoms of withdrawal. Nicotine is dangerous because it causes diseases such as lung cancer, emphysema, heart disease, and stroke.

How does it occur?

Nicotine affects the brain. It creates pleasure in the brain, causes a feeling of relaxation, and elevates your mood. Over time, nicotine keeps your brain from supplying chemicals that create these good feelings naturally. As a result, you crave more nicotine and the feelings it produces. A strong craving for tobacco may last for 6 months or more after you quit. For some people, in addition to the effect of nicotine, the feel, smell, and sight of a cigarette and the ritual of handling, lighting, and smoking cigarettes are very pleasurable. These pleasurable feelings make withdrawal and cravings worse.

What are the symptoms?

You are dependent on nicotine if you cannot reduce or stop your use of nicotine even though you know it is hurting you.

When you stop using nicotine, you may have withdrawal symptoms such as:

- irritability
- shakiness
- trouble concentrating
- trouble sleeping
- increased appetite
- increased craving for nicotine.

How is it treated?

You must give up nicotine. This means stop smoking cigarettes, cigars, or pipes, or stop chewing tobacco.

Your healthcare provider can prescribe nicotine substitutes that can almost double your chances of quitting for good. They include nicotine inhalers, lozenges, nasal sprays, and patches. A medicine called Zyban (bupropion HCL) may be prescribed to lessen the craving for nicotine. None of these treatments is a miracle cure. You still need to learn to live without cigarettes in your daily life. Joining an organized quit-smoking program while you are using nicotine replacements can help you quit.

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How can I take care of myself?

There are things you can do you help yourself quit smoking:

- Set a quit date.
- Throw your cigarettes away.
- Join a stop-smoking support group or class.
- Get support from family and friends.
- Spend time with people who don't smoke.
- Start an exercise program.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Keep yourself busy.
- Think about using nicotine gum or patches.
- Think about asking your doctor for a prescription medicine that can help you quit.

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