

10 common myths about smoking and quitting

1. Nicotine is the major toxic ingredient in cigarettes

WRONG. *Nicotine is the addictive drug in cigarettes but it causes few other health effects.*

Nicotine in dosages present in cigarettes does not cause heart attacks, cancer or lung damage. It is the other 7,000 toxins and chemicals in tobacco which are harmful, particularly tar and carbon monoxide. There are 70 known cancer causing agents in tobacco smoke.

2. Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) is as harmful as smoking

WRONG. *NRT (patch, gum, lozenge, inhalator, mouth spray and oral strips) is always much safer than smoking.*

NRT replaces some of the nicotine your body receives from smoking, but at a much lower level. Nicotine from NRT has few side-effects. Most of the harm from smoking is from the tar and carbon monoxide which are not found in nicotine replacement products.

Nicotine from NRT is delivered much more slowly and at lower levels than from smoking. As a result, the risk of becoming addicted to NRT is very small. In any case, long term use of NRT carries very little risk and is much safer than continuing to smoke.

3. Smoking while using NRT is dangerous

WRONG. *Smoking while using NRT is no more dangerous than smoking.*

Studies have found no significant side-effects from using NRT while smoking. When receiving nicotine

from NRT, smokers generally cut down their cigarette intake or smoke less intensely as they need less nicotine from cigarettes.

4. Using more than one form of NRT (such as nicotine patch + nicotine mouth spray) is unsafe

WRONG. *Combining more than one form of NRT can be used safely to help you quit.*

Combining a nicotine patch with the nicotine mouth spray, lozenge, gum, oral strips or inhalator causes no significant increase in side-effects over just using the patch alone. The combination gives better relief of cravings and nicotine withdrawal symptoms and increases the chance of quitting successfully, particularly for those who are very nicotine dependent. Combination therapy is now widely recommended by tobacco treatment specialists

5. Smoking helps to relieve stress

WRONG. *Research has shown that smoking increases stress levels overall.*

Much of the apparent calming effect of a cigarette is simply due to the relief of symptoms (such as irritability, anxiety and restlessness) caused by nicotine withdrawal. Also, some of the relaxation from smoking is from taking a break and a few deep breaths, not the cigarette itself.

Smoking increases stress by causing frequent withdrawal periods during the day between cigarettes. Further stress is created by the guilt and shame of smoking and by concerns about the health effects. Furthermore, nicotine is a stimulant

and releases stress hormones such as adrenaline. Research studies have shown that ex-smokers report feeling less stressed than when they were smoking.

6. Cutting down your cigarettes or smoking mild cigarettes reduces the harm from smoking

WRONG. *Cutting down your cigarette intake or changing to milder cigarettes does not improve your health and does not significantly reduce your risk of dying from a smoking-related disease.*

The reason is that smokers subconsciously adjust their smoking when they cut down or smoke weaker cigarettes (compensatory smoking). When you smoke fewer or weaker cigarettes, you smoke each cigarette more intensely to extract more nicotine and keep your nicotine level in the comfort zone. You take more puffs and deeper puffs from each cigarette to compensate for the reduced number or weaker cigarettes.

7. Smoking just a few cigarettes daily is fairly harmless

WRONG. *The research shows the health risks from light smoking are substantial.*

Smokers of only 1-4 cigarettes per day have 3 times the risk of dying from a heart attack and 3-5 times the risk of dying from lung cancer compared to non-smokers. Overall their risk of death from any cause is increased by 57% compared to non-smokers.

Other conditions proven to be increased in light smokers include gastrointestinal cancers (oesophagus, stomach, and pancreas), lower respiratory tract infections, cataracts, reduced fertility in men and women, ectopic pregnancy, placenta praevia and reduced bone mineral density.

8. Hypnotherapy or acupuncture are effective quitting strategies

WRONG. *There is no good evidence that hypnotherapy or acupuncture are effective in helping smokers quit.*

These treatments generally do no harm and some people will quit successfully due to the placebo effect. However it would make more sense to use other treatments that are proven to be effective. The longer you delay successful quitting with unproven strategies, the more damage is being done to your body.

9. It is too late to quit. The damage is done

WRONG. *The damage from smoking improves quickly after quitting at any age.*

Many of the health effects of smoking reverse quite rapidly after quitting at any age. Quitting before the age of 50 reduces your risk of dying in

the next 15 years by half. The risk of having a heart attack falls by 50% after about 3 years. In the case of lung cancer, your risk drops to half in 10 years.

The benefits of quitting are greatest when you stop earlier. However, even quitting at 60 years of age increases life expectancy by 3 years compared to those who continue to smoke.

10. Champix (varenicline) can make you depressed or suicidal

WRONG. *There is no scientific evidence that Champix causes these symptoms.*

There have been reports that some patients using Champix became depressed, agitated, had changes in their behaviour, suicidal thoughts or actually committed suicide. However, a careful review of all the scientific evidence found no evidence that Champix was the cause. Recently, there have been several studies of Champix in smokers suffering from depression and schizophrenia. The patients using Champix had no more side-effects of this type than those using placebo.

Stopping smoking can cause the symptoms mentioned above and this is probably the main cause of those reports, not Champix. Nevertheless, if you use Champix to help you quit, it is important to report any changes in your mood or behaviour to your doctor.

Champix is the most powerful anti-smoking medication available and has helped many people to quit who otherwise could not. It is safe and well tolerated. Side effects can occur with any drug but should be weighed up against the enormous health risks from continuing to smoke.

For help with quitting smoking contact the Quitline 13 7848 (13 QUIT) or speak with your health professional.

Visit the websites: www.icanquit.com.au and www.quitnow.gov.au

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