

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

What happens after the last cigarette?

You know that smoking is one of the leading causes of preventable deaths but the process of quitting seems too daunting. After all, you've tried and failed so many times. Are there things you can do this time that will finally make you a non-smoker? Perhaps the best way to stay motivated is by understanding how quickly your body begins to repair itself after the last cigarette.

After the last cigarette

Just 20 minutes after your last cigarette, your heart rate drops and returns to normal. Your blood pressure also begins to drop and your circulation starts to improve – your hands and feet are not as cold. Here's what else to expect over the first hours, days, and weeks:

- **Eight hours.** Nicotine levels in your blood fall by 93 percent.
- **12 hours.** Your body has eliminates all excess carbon monoxide and your blood oxygen levels become normal.
- **24 hours.** Withdrawal symptoms really kick in as your body demands nicotine levels be restored. Your anxiety increases and you may experience irritability, headaches, insomnia, difficulty concentrating and restlessness.
- **Two days.** You realize that your senses of smell and taste are greatly improved. This is because nerve endings damaged by smoking are starting to heal.
- **10 days.** Your cravings begin to subside.
- **One month.** The worst is over as physical withdrawal symptoms should have ended. Your lung function is markedly improved and you can exercise longer. Over the next weeks, your circulation also continues to improve.
- **Six months.** You may develop a dry cough. This is a good sign that the cilia, the delicate, hair like structures in your lungs, are now able to filter tar and other toxins out of your body.
- **Nine months.** Your lungs are almost healed. The cilia can now do their job of fighting infection.
- **One year.** Your risks of coronary heart disease, heart attack and stroke are now half those of a smoker.
- **Five years**. Your risk of stroke are the same as a non-smoker and by 15 to 20 years, your risks of developing any smoking related illness are the same as someone who has never smoked.

Dealing with withdrawal

The physical symptoms of withdrawal quickly pass, but the mental component takes longer and can be much harder to overcome. Years of smoking have taught you to react to *everything* – anger, hunger, stress or even boredom ─ by lighting a cigarette. Here are some strategies to help.

- **Use the 4 D's** to help fight cravings:

1. **Delay** for 10 minutes. When the urge to light up strikes, put yourself in a situation where it is impossible to smoke; any non-smoking area will do.
2. **Distract.** Find something else to do. Vacuum, go for a walk, talk to a friend, etc.
3. **Deep breathing.** Close your eyes, take several slow, deep breathes – in through your nose and out through your mouth.

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4. **Drink water.** This gives you something to do and keeps you hydrated. However, check with your doctor if you are using nicotine based stop smoking aids as constantly drinking water may reduce their effectiveness.

- **Be patient with yourself**. Quitting smoking is a process. If you "fall off the wagon", wake up the next morning and get right back on. You haven't failed, you've just hit a minor bump and can get back on track today!
- **Don't obsess about your weight.** You can expect to gain a few pounds, but if you eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly you will likely lose them in a couple of months.
- **Stay busy.** Many people smoke because they're bored. Meet a friend, get involved with a favorite sport, take up a hobby, go for a walk or tackle household projects.
- **Create a support system.** Let your family, friends and co-workers know you're quitting smoking and that you may be a little irritable or have difficulty concentrating for a couple of weeks. It helps to know that people are on your side**.**

Finally, find more appropriate ways to handle your feelings. For example, exercise, practicing relaxation techniques, joining a support group or talking to trusted friends may all be helpful. If, after a few weeks, you continue to feel angry, upset, depressed or overwhelmed, contact your family physician or reach out to your Employee Assistance Program.