



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 eliminated 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.

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- **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.
 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 favourite sport, take up a hobby, go for a walk or tackle household projects.

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- **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 and Family Assistance Program.

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Friend therapy

From childhood to old age, friends play a monumental role in our lives – and our health. Friendships help lower our blood pressure, maintain hormone function, bolster our immune systems, reduce inflammation, sustain cognitive function as we age and even help us live longer. Studies have shown that not having good friends is as bad for our long-term physical health as both obesity and smoking!

Friends are also essential to our mental health. They boost our self-confidence and self-esteem while helping us deal with everyday problems and traumatic events. Most of all, good friends make life more fun.

Talking things out

Talking to someone about how we're feeling or what's going on in our lives helps us clarify issues and gain different perspectives on situations. Mental health professionals have used "talk therapy" for decades to manage and overcome mental health issues or difficult life events. Psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors are invaluable resources when we're facing tough situations, feeling overwhelmed or dealing with a mental illness. But in our daily lives, close friends offer another level of support that involves affection and shared experiences. Friends know our history, our strengths and weaknesses, our goals and our dreams. While not being professional therapists, they can be greatly therapeutic!

Technology has provided us with new kinds of friendships that can be just as beneficial – online relationships. These can also be a source of emotional support, advice and connection, especially for people with mobility issues or those living far away from family and long-time friends. The online world of social media, special interest sites and discussion groups allows us to connect with like-minded people anywhere and at any time.

How to be a good friend

If we want good friends, we have to be a good friend. There are certain characteristics that are essential in forging and cultivating any close, lasting relationship. These include:

- **Listening.** It sounds simple but make sure you're listening as much as you're talking about yourself.
- **Dependability.** Your friends should always feel like they can count on you in both good times and bad. Good friends are those who are the first to drop what they're doing to help out when you're sick or hand you a tissue when you are upset. Try to keep your promises. If you're not sure you can do something, don't agree to do it then back out later.
- **Honesty and sincerity.** Your friends need to know that you are honest about your feelings and sincere with your advice. However, being honest is different from being so blunt that you're hurting someone's feelings. For example, you may be concerned about a friend who seems to have given up looking for a job, but instead of saying, "You need to get it together" or "You're not trying hard enough," gently inquire about what's going on in her life that's making her feel defeated -- then offer to help get her back on track.

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- **Trustworthiness.** The most important element in any relationship is trust. People need to know that you'll keep confidences.
- **Forgiveness.** Any lasting relationship involves forgiveness. Don't let resentment build up. If you're angry at a friend, tell them why and talk about the issue.
- **Unconditional support.** Good friends accept you for who you are. They love you despite your flaws. They're patient when you make mistakes and encourage you to reach your goals. They only have your best interests at heart.
- **Staying connected.** The demands of work and family can cause people to lose touch. Sometimes a simple email, Facebook post, tweet or phone call is all that's needed to show you still care. Even if you're miles apart, a friendship can be maintained.

For more information on making and developing friendships or accessing a mental health professional, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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