

Smoking Cessation for Older Adults: It's Not Too Late!

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"But I've been smoking for 45 years."

"The damage has already been done."

"Why shouldn't I enjoy my cigarettes? It doesn't matter at my age."

The truth is, it *does* matter. Seniors who quit smoking tend to enjoy better health and quality of life than their peers who continue to smoke.

Why It's Not Too Late

Many people don't realize that smoking cessation has immediate as well as long-term benefits. Here are some benefits found in individuals, both young and old, who stop smoking:

In one day:

- Blood circulation increases.
- Carbon monoxide levels in the blood decrease.
- Heart rate and blood pressure decrease.
- The risk of having a heart attack decreases.

In several days to several weeks:

- Sense of taste and smell improves.
- Lung capacity increases.
- Breathing becomes easier.

In several weeks to nine months:

- Energy level increases.
- Lungs become cleaner and more functional.
- Colds and other respiratory tract infections become less common.
- Sinus congestion decreases.
- Shortness of breath decreases.

Long-term benefits (several years to 10+ years):

Risk of heart disease and lung cancer **decrease. (Risk can eventually be similar to that of a lifelong nonsmoker.)**

Risk of cancers of the mouth, esophagus, larynx, bladder, pancreas, and kidney

decreases.

Other Health Benefits

Quitting smoking has additional health benefits such as decreased risk of peripheral vascular disease, stroke, and chronic lung disease (bronchitis, emphysema, and asthma). Giving up cigarettes may also reduce your risk of cataracts, macular degeneration, thyroid conditions, hearing loss, erectile dysfunction, dementia, and osteoporosis.

Even if you already have a chronic disease, quitting smoking may help reduce the severity of your symptoms and keep you healthier longer. Still think it's too late?

Teaching an Older Smoker New Tricks

"But I've been smoking for 45 years!" you say. "I'll never be able to quit smoking at this point."

You may be surprised to hear that older smokers are usually more successful at quitting smoking than younger smokers. This is especially true if they already have health problems, particularly those associated with smoking.

Studies suggest that elderly persons who ask their doctors about help for smoking cessation are more likely to get that help *and* may be more likely to be successful quitters. At your next medical visit don't forget to ask what you and your doctor together can do to help you kick the habit.

Before You Get Off Your Butts...

- **List all the reasons you want to quit smoking and look at your list often.**
- **Get help from your doctor, a smoking cessation specialist, or a group cessation program. Discuss using nicotine replacement products (patch, chewing gum) along with a behavior change program.**
- **One week before you quit, keep a journal of when and where you smoke each cigarette. Record how you are feeling each time (happy, anxious, relaxed, angry, sad, lonely, etc.). This will help you be more aware of your smoking patterns.**
- **Choose a method of quitting, such as gradually cutting back or quitting all at once. Quitting all at once tends to be most effective.**
- **Set a quit date on your calendar.**

Kick Some Ashes!

- **On quit day, throw out all your cigarettes and ashtrays.**

- Review your smoking journal and identify your smoking patterns. If you regularly smoke in certain places at certain times (in the kitchen after a meal, for example), change your routine (get up from the table after eating). Identify other high-risk situations such as stress, depression, and being around other smokers. Have a plan for every situation.
- Create a list of ways to distract yourself from a cigarette craving. Examples include calling a friend, taking a walk, chewing gum, or taking a warm bath.
- Reward yourself with a treat (not food) for every week you don't smoke. Put the money you save in a jar and watch it grow.
- Have a supportive "buddy" (preferably an ex-smoker) you can call during the rough times.
- Withdrawal symptoms should go away in a few days. Nicotine replacement products and bupropion often help. Try to get more rest and relaxation.
- To avoid weight gain, eat low-fat meals and snacks with lots of fruit, vegetables, and whole grains. Drink lots of water. Exercise daily. Consult a nutritionist if weight gain becomes a problem.

If You Fall on Your Butts Again...

Many people go back to smoking sometimes years after quitting when a crisis hits. Plan ahead for how you will handle a stressful event such as a death, divorce, retirement, illness, etc. That way, you won't be caught off guard.

Most ex-smokers make several attempts to quit before they are successful. If you start smoking again, don't let feelings of regret, guilt, or failure get a handle on you. Learn from your setbacks and get right back on the program. It's not too late!

RESOURCES: Canadian Lung Association

<http://www.lung.ca/>

Health Canada

http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/index_e.html

REFERENCES:

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