

Why do some people quit smoking for good while others return to the habit? We've identified some key factors that may help you stub out cigarettes

Everyone knows smoking is bad for you, but quitting isn't easy. To find out what works and what doesn't when you're trying to give up, we spoke to ten ex-smokers, and ten smokers who are still trying to quit.

When planning this article, we set out to look at products which claim to help you stop smoking, to see which ones people found most useful. But after talking to our smokers and ex-smokers, a clear picture emerged – the method or product you use to help you quit is less important than the support network you organise and the preparation you do before you stop.

MAKING THE DECISION TO STOP

Many of the ex-smokers we spoke to had made a conscious decision to stop for themselves, not because friends or family were nagging. This decision motivated them, even when they craved a cigarette. One woman said: 'I do get cravings, but somehow it doesn't seem so bad when nobody's forcing you.' Those who'd tried to quit without success had felt they were forced into giving up – by nagging family members, poor health or lack of money. As one woman said: 'I don't think I wanted to stop.'

PREPARING TO GIVE UP

The more preparation people made before quitting, the more likely they were to succeed.

Practical preparation may mean changing your routines – for example, switching to soft drinks instead of coffee, if that's when you normally have a cigarette. If you smoke as a way to get a break, think about other ways to relax. Our quitters found it important to have strategies in place to deal with cravings, such as doing breathing exercises or reading a list of the reasons why you are giving up. Be careful about replacing cigarettes with sweet treats, though. Rewarding yourself may help – you could use the money you would have spent on cigarettes to buy a book after the first day, for example, or a relaxing massage after a week, and so on.

If possible, take advantage of life changes, such as a move to a job in a non-smoking environment or a new house, as an opportunity to stop smoking. However, if you quit on holiday, you may still need strategies to cope with the times you'd normally have a cigarette at home or at work.

Mental preparation involves seeing giving up in a positive light. For example, some people found that believing they were gaining rather than giving something up – such as better health or more money – was a key factor in helping them quit. They also felt a sense of achievement once they'd beaten the habit. If you mentally empower yourself to believe you don't need to smoke, changing routines may not be

OUR INTERVIEWS

We interviewed 20 people in Brighton, Leeds, London and Surrey in February this year. We selected people who'd used a variety of methods to help in their attempts to quit smoking; half of them had stopped smoking successfully, while the other half were still trying.



No more

necessary. One ex-smoker stressed the importance of not linking crises to cigarettes: 'I thought, well, starting smoking again won't change the situation.'

GETTING SUPPORT

While nagging from partners or children is unhelpful and can even provoke you to smoke in secret, subtle encouragement can help. If your partner smokes, ask them to hide their cigarettes and not to offer you any – several people said they went back to smoking when their spouse offered them a cigarette.

Stopping smoking with a friend or partner can be helpful but, if one person relapses, the danger is that the other might start smoking, too. Group support may be a better option as, if someone gives in to the nicotine cravings, the group can encourage them to keep trying to give up. To find a local group, contact your GP, your local health authority, or, in Northern Ireland, call the Ulster Cancer Foundation. You could even follow the example of one of our ex-smokers who



TOP TIPS FOR QUITTING

- Prepare mentally – think why you want to stop, and write it down to remind you later.
- Keep a smoking diary for a couple of days, then work out what activities you associate with smoking. Change your habits – if you always have a cigarette with a cup of coffee, switch to herbal tea or fruit juice.
- Work out how much money you'll save, and use that money to reward yourself.
- Take up a positive new habit – go swimming, join a gym, or treat yourself to a regular massage.
- Get support – set up a stop smoking group with friends or join a local group. Tell friends and family you're stopping, and ask them not to offer you a cigarette.
- Talk to your GP about NRT or Zyban. Think about whether other products or therapies might help you, but remember that there's little evidence to prove that they work.
- Set a date to stop, and get rid of ashtrays, cigarettes and lighters. If people offer you a cigarette, tell them that you don't smoke. They're less likely to press you than if you say you've given up.
- When the cravings kick in, do deep breathing exercises, focus on why you've stopped, or talk to someone to take your mind off it.
- Don't have a cigarette – there's no such thing as just one. But, if you do lapse, remember that it is worth trying to quit again.

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set up a group with her friends. Telephone helplines can offer support and may also help you find a support group, too (see 'Contacts and links', p57, for details of these).

PRODUCTS AND THERAPIES TO HELP YOU QUIT

There are many aids and therapies claiming to help you quit. Before using them, it's important to know how they can help and what their limits are – none is a miracle cure.

Nicotine replacement therapy

Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) works by giving you a fixed dose of nicotine to reduce your craving for a cigarette. It comes in several forms: gum, patches, small tablets, lozenges, nasal sprays and as an inhalator. All the forms are available on prescription and from pharmacies. In trials, NRT has been shown to almost double the number of people who successfully stopped smoking for one year, from one

in ten to one in six. The people in the trials were also given support and advice to help them quit.

The quitters we spoke to who had used NRT said it gave them a boost – but they still needed some determination. Those who didn't manage to give up with it had tended to be more reluctant to quit in the first place. While NRT helped, it didn't cut cravings totally, and people still needed strategies for coping when they wanted a cigarette. Those who stopped smoking with NRT also had support from family or friends, while those who relapsed had felt alone in their struggle. Studies show that NRT works best with counselling or support.

Zyban

Zyban (bupropion) is thought to work on the parts of the brain associated with addiction to help reduce cravings. You take it for one to two weeks before you stop smoking, and continue for up to two months. Trials on people who were motivated to quit show that Zyban at least doubles your chances of stopping smoking successfully for one year, when combined with counselling. Zyban is available only on prescription. Your doctor may also refer you to a smoking cessation specialist or support group.

All the people we spoke to who had tried Zyban had also tried other methods to help them quit, and they had high expectations of it. However, the key difference between those who succeeded with Zyban and those who relapsed back to smoking was the degree to which they participated with the initial counselling offered with Zyban, and how much

NRT AND ZYBAN

For more information about NRT and Zyban, read our leaflet *Medicines to help you stop smoking*. It's produced by Consumer Association's *Drug & Therapeutics Bulletin* team as part of a new series called *Treatment Notes*. Call our Members' Helpline on 0845 307 4000 and quote code STOPSMM for a free copy.





preparation they'd made for giving up. Those who kicked the habit had identified when they might find it difficult without a cigarette, prepared strategies for coping with cravings, and had some support. In contrast, those who relapsed had hoped that Zyban would provide a cure for smoking, and had done less to prepare for any difficulties.

There have been concerns over adverse reactions to Zyban and it may not be prescribed if you have certain medical conditions – for example, if you are

prone to fits or are taking some drugs, such as anti-psychotics and anti-depressants. The Committee on the Safety of Medicines now advises a lower dose of Zyban for the first seven days of treatment (previously, a lower dose was recommended for only four days). Our colleagues on *Drug & Therapeutics Bulletin* concluded in December that the drug's possible advantage over NRT is yet to be fully proven.

Seeing a therapist

Many people try therapies such as hypnotherapy or acupuncture to help them stop smoking. However, there's little evidence that they help. The British Acupuncture Council explains that acupuncturists can assist people who want to quit, but should never claim to offer a cure. Similarly, the British Society of Hypnotherapists says that hypnotherapy can help give you a boost. The people we interviewed were attracted to such therapies because they didn't involve chemicals or drugs.

Forms of counselling may be helpful; one person said they'd learnt about adopting a positive mental attitude and being committed to stop smoking from a counsellor, and another said they valued the advice they received from an Allen Carr clinic. But, yet again, those who saw a therapist and succeeded in quitting had also prepared themselves for their attempt. They were also more willing to explore the reasons behind their smoking with their therapist.

Be wary of practitioners who claim unrealistically high success rates – their methods are unlikely to be as successful as NRT or Zyban. When choosing a practitioner, check that they are registered with a professional body, and ask how many sessions you'll need, as you'll usually have to pay for this sort of help.

NRT HELPED DEFEAT THE CRAVINGS

Maggie Haddock smoked from the age of 15, but has been free of her 40-a-day habit for more than a year now. Prompted by breathing difficulties, she tried to quit on several occasions without success. Realising that smoking could kill her before her children grew up, Maggie decided to join a smoking cessation group.

At the group, they discussed the pros and cons of different forms of NRT. As a heavy smoker, Maggie chose 24-hour patches, starting with the maximum strength. In previous attempts, cravings had got the better of her, but this time the continuous support from the patches helped. They made her feel unwell when she started, but her group rightly assured her that side effects would be short term. Everyone paired up with a 'buddy' who they could call for support. Maggie said: 'I called my buddy when I'd been having a terrible day and she explained some breathing exercises to do.'



Maggie used the patches for four and a half months, gradually reducing the strength. She rewarded herself with an exercise bike – not buying cigarettes effectively gave her a £120 a month rise. Commenting on her success in quitting, she said: 'I couldn't have done it without the support of my family.' Maggie still gets an occasional phone call from her support group to check how she is getting on.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T GIVE UP...

Jayne Allott was a 20-a-day smoker and had tried to stop many times without success. When she heard about Zyban she decided to try again.

Her GP referred her to a local smoking cessation group. At an introductory meeting, support workers explained how Zyban and NRT could help and any possible side effects they might have. Jayne decided on Zyban. She was given a date to quit (approximately two weeks after starting Zyban) and was told to carry on smoking until this time. But after only a few days of taking the drug, she didn't want to smoke as much.

Jayne thinks the thing that helped her stay off the

cigarettes was the support she received in the weekly group meetings. In previous attempts, she had often felt alone.

After six weeks, each group member was given a certificate and encouraged to continue attending monthly meetings, which Jayne did. However, when she went on holiday a few months after quitting, she smoked 'just one' cigarette, which led to another, and within a couple of weeks Jayne was smoking regularly again. She has decided to try quitting again, though. 'Zyban helped more than any of the other products I've tried, so I'm giving it another go,' she says.



Other aids

There are many products that claim to help you quit such as silver acetate mouthwashes – which make cigarettes taste bad – dummy cigarettes, and herbal cigarettes or tablets. Generally, there's insufficient evidence that they help and they don't offer any real support for nicotine withdrawal. However, they may be helpful if used alongside NRT or Zyban. Again, be wary of claims of high success rates.

Quitters we talked to who had used these sorts of product hadn't relied on them alone. They generally had done some preparation and had support.

Cold turkey

Most smokers attempt to quit using willpower alone but this is the least effective method, with just 1 or 2 per cent staying off cigarettes for a year or more. The people we interviewed who stopped by using willpower alone had a dreadful time stopping, although this is not the case for everybody. Everyone needs some willpower to break the habit, but you don't have to do it alone. Products such as NRT and Zyban, used alongside support, can increase your chances of stopping cigarette smoking for good.