

# An Overview of Nicotine Withdrawal

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Nicotine withdrawal can cause a host of physical and psychological symptoms that leave new ex-smokers feeling both physically ill and mentally stressed and anxious.

Knowledge about what to expect when you quit smoking and a plan to manage the ups and downs will help you manage this phase of smoking cessation successfully.

## Top 5 Things to Know About Nicotine Withdrawal

**You are withdrawing from an extremely addictive drug.** When inhaled or ingested, nicotine bonds with receptors in our brains that trigger the release of dopamine, a feel-good hormone that is thought to be closely tied to the addictive process. Your body will react to the absence of nicotine and so will your mind, so don't worry if you feel bad and can't stop thinking about smoking. The discomforts are normal and temporary.

**The key word is temporary.**

It won't feel temporary while you're in the midst of it, but nicotine withdrawal *will* pass as long as you don't smoke.

**Junkie thinking is part of nicotine withdrawal.**

Or, to put it more accurately, junkie thinking is part of nicotine addiction. Once you stop smoking, you can expect that your mind will twist itself into knots trying to convince you to smoke. Put yourself on ignore and don't light up. Junkie thinking will subside with time.

**Remember that smoking is responsible for how you're feeling.**

It is common for new ex-smokers in the throes of nicotine withdrawal to think that quitting smoking is to blame for the pain they're in. The truth is that smoking (and the nicotine addiction that followed it) is why you're feeling so bad right now. If you smoke, you'll be back to going through nicotine withdrawal every time you need a cigarette. If you stick with your quit, this will be the last time you have to experience nicotine withdrawal.

**You gotta *go* through it to *get* through it.**

There is no avoiding this part of smoking cessation. The nicotine has to leave your body. That said, there are quit aids that can ease or even eliminate the discomforts. More on that below.

Think of nicotine withdrawal as a task to be completed during recovery from nicotine addiction. It doesn't take long in the grand scheme of things.

## What Are the Symptoms of Nicotine Withdrawal?

Simply put, just about any new discomfort you have after stubbing out your last cigarette could be related to nicotine withdrawal.

The following list contains the most commonly reported symptoms of nicotine withdrawal.

- cravings to smoke
- irritability, crankiness
- insomnia
- fatigue
- inability to concentrate
- headache
- cough
- sore throat
- constipation, gas, stomach pain
- dry mouth
- sore tongue and/or gums
- postnasal drip
- tightness in the chest

Check with your doctor if you're concerned about a physical reaction you're having to smoking cessation, or if nicotine withdrawal symptoms persist or worsen.

## Withdrawal From Other Chemicals

Cigarettes contain upwards of 7000 chemicals, and many of them affect the way we feel on a day-to-day basis. Smokers tend to discount some of the physical reactions they have to smoking because they come on gradually over the years.

For instance, that headache you have three or four days a week might be stress, or it could be the carbon monoxide you're inhaling numerous times a day. Or, the burning, itchy eyes you seem to experience most nights might be a reaction to the [formaldehyde in the cigarette smoke](#) you're exposed to, not eye fatigue. Some of the chemicals in cigarettes even deplete our bodies of essential vitamins.

If you don't already take a multi-vitamin, this would be a good time to add one to your daily regimen. Be sure to eat a balanced, healthy diet now, too. Give your body the best fuel you can while it is recuperating from cigarette use.

## How Long Does Nicotine Withdrawal Last?

If you quit smoking cold turkey, the majority of the nicotine in your body will be released during the first day, though the exact timing varies from person to person. Cotinine, a major metabolite of nicotine is detectable in the blood, saliva, and urine for a number of days longer.

If you use a quit aid containing nicotine, you will taper off of nicotine during the course of the prescribed therapy. This eases the symptoms of nicotine withdrawal considerably. Just be careful to follow the directions for the NRT of your choice carefully, ending as recommended by the manufacturer or your doctor.

If you use a non-nicotine quit aid like [Chantix](#) or [Zyban](#), you might be able to avoid the symptoms of nicotine withdrawal completely. These prescription quit aids are not for everyone, however, so have a conversation with your doctor if you're interested in trying one of them.

## What Can I Do to Minimize the Discomforts?

There are a number of steps you can take to make nicotine withdrawal more tolerable.

**Eat a well-balanced diet.** As mentioned above, good fuel in equals good energy out. New ex-smokers often crave all of the wrong foods. We want sweets and salty snacks, hoping to dampen the desire to smoke. In truth, we probably gravitate to food as a replacement for smoking because, like cigarettes, it triggers the release of dopamine in our brains. If you fill up on too much junk, though, it will negatively affect how you feel physically and psychologically. You may start to gain weight as well, so do your best to eat right.

**Exercise, exercise, exercise.** As with food and nicotine, exercise also causes our brains to release dopamine. Get out for a walk, or head to the gym to sweat out some of the angst of nicotine withdrawal. It will improve your mindset and your physical well-being.

**Drink water.** Good hydration is always important, but even more so while you're going through nicotine withdrawal. Your body is releasing toxins, and water will help flush them out. Drink a tall glass of water when you're craving a smoke to break the thought, too. It works.

**Get More Rest.** Fatigue is common during nicotine withdrawal. If you're tired and can manage it during the day, take a nap. At the end of the day, go to bed a little earlier than usual if you need to. It will do you good.

On the other hand, if you're at the opposite end of the spectrum and find yourself suddenly suffering from quit-related insomnia (also common), try taking a long walk several hours before bed to get your body ready for sleep.

**Breathe.** In those first days of smoking cessation, it can feel as though your day is one long craving to smoke. The truth is that most urges to smoke last three to five minutes. Rather than tensing up when a smoking urge hits, try some deep breathing. It will help you ride the craving through in a more relaxed way.

**Distract yourself.** Create a short list of ways to pull yourself out of a smoking urge or negative thought pattern that you can employ at a moment's notice (water and breathing are good entries). Change what you're doing abruptly and your mind will also shift and move away from the downward spiral it's on.

## What Comes Next?

Successfully navigating nicotine withdrawal is a necessary step in healing from nicotine addiction, but don't make the mistake of thinking that that is all there is to it.

You've gotten the physical monkey of nicotine off of your back, and now you need to reprogram all of the mental associations you have with smoking. This part of recovery takes a bit more time, but it's also not as intense as nicotine withdrawal, so take heart. It's really just a matter of living your life, one day at a time without a cigarette in hand. You will learn to react to situations

that trigger smoking urges without lighting up, and when you do, your mind registers the change and it's easier the next time around.

Give yourself the benefit of a full year smoke-free and you'll be well on your way to a life where not smoking is natural and comfortable.