

Smoking - weight gain and quitting

Weight gain after quitting is a serious concern for some smokers. About 80 per cent of smokers put on weight when they quit. However most ex-smokers only gain a modest amount of weight.

The average weight gain is between four to six kilograms in the first year after stopping smoking. Research shows that in the long term, the average body weight of ex-smokers is similar to people who have never smoked.

Smoking appears to change the distribution of fat in women to a less healthy male 'apple' pattern. Women who smoke tend to put on more fat around their waist compared to women who do not smoke. Fat in this area is associated with risks such as stroke, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and a general increased death rate.

When women quit smoking, any weight gain that occurs is in the normal and safer female pattern, with a preference to the hips rather than the waist.

The best approach is to focus on strategies to keep healthy rather than on weight control. These include making realistic goals for healthy eating, getting regular exercise and getting enough sleep. These strategies can also help minimise weight gain. However, it can be helpful to be prepared to accept at least a small increase in weight.

It can be difficult to quit cigarettes and manage weight at the same time, because both activities require effort and commitment. If this is the case for you, concentrate first on quitting. See your doctor or dietitian for further information and advice if weight gain is a problem.

The causes of weight gain

The two main causes of weight gain when quitting smoking are thought to be:

- **Eating more food** – many smokers find their eating habits change when they quit cigarettes. Some people experience increased hunger as a withdrawal symptom, but research suggests their eating patterns eventually return to normal.
- **The effect of nicotine on the body** – nicotine is the addictive substance in tobacco that causes smokers to continue their habit. Although nicotine isn't thought to cause cancer, it does speed up the body's food processing system, the metabolism. After many years of smoking, smokers tend to weigh slightly less than non-smokers.

Researchers suggest that one of the reasons why smokers tend to put on some weight after quitting is because their metabolism slows down, and they burn fewer kilojoules than while they were smoking. This would explain why some ex-smokers put on weight even if they do not eat any more than usual.

Eating instead of smoking

Some ex-smokers eat more, particularly in the first few days or weeks after quitting. Some of the reasons include:

- The restless, empty feeling of nicotine withdrawal can feel very similar to hunger pangs. The smoker may be 'fooled' into thinking they're hungry when they are not.
- Missing the oral satisfaction of putting a cigarette into their mouths prompts some ex-smokers to substitute food for cigarettes. Instead of lighting up, they eat something.
- Food can be comforting. If an ex-smoker is having a hard time during the withdrawal period, they may reward themselves with treats and snacks in an attempt to feel better.

- Some smokers regularly skip meals – for example, breakfast may be a cup of coffee and a couple of cigarettes. Once you stop smoking, you may find that you don't feel like skipping meals anymore.
- Many ex-smokers find that food tastes better, and this may lead to more helpings.

Tips on healthy eating and exercise

Suggestions include:

- Exercise more often – being inactive is a risk factor for weight gain. Aim for around half an hour of moderate activity every day, for example, brisk walking, gardening, swimming or cycling. You can do 10 minutes of exercise at a time, adding up to a total of 30 minutes over the day, if you prefer.
- Muscle tissue burns more kilojoules than fat. You can boost your metabolic rate by including one or two weight training sessions into your weekly exercise program to build up muscle.
- Don't crash diet. If you eat too few kilojoules, the body will respond by lowering the metabolism and burning muscle tissue for fuel.
- It can be tricky telling the difference between hunger pangs and withdrawal cravings. Get into the habit of 'listening' to your body before you decide to eat something.
- It takes about 15 minutes for your stomach to signal your brain that it's full, so wait before having second helpings. You might find you don't want it after all.
- Find ways other than eating to cope with withdrawal cravings. Some people drink water, while others count to 100 – experiment until you find your own method.
- Put safe, non-edible items in your mouth if oral cravings bother you. For example, you could use toothpicks or cinnamon sticks, or chew on sugarless gum.
- If you need to snack, keep raw vegetable sticks and other low fat, low kilojoule foods on hand.
- Eat more fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods.
- Cut back on high fat, high salt and high sugar products. You can do this easily by not stocking these types of foods in your kitchen pantry.
- Alcoholic drinks can contain many kilojoules. Try alternating with water or other low kilojoule drinks.
- Be kind to yourself if you do put on a few kilos. You are boosting your health by quitting.

If you put on weight

If you've gained weight despite your best efforts, don't despair. A few extra kilograms are a much lower risk compared to the risk of continuing to smoke. You would have to gain over 40 kilograms above your recommended weight to equal the risk of heart disease posed by smoking.

Don't think that taking up smoking again will mean you will shed the weight – sometimes it doesn't. Concentrate on improving your diet and increasing your physical activity. See your doctor or dietitian for help and advice.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- Quitline Tel. 13 7848 (13 QUIT)

Things to remember

- About 80 per cent of smokers put on weight after they quit.
- The causes of weight gain may include the effect of nicotine on the body, and the ex-smoker's inclination to eat more food.
- You would have to gain over 40 kilograms above your recommended weight to equal the risk of heart disease posed by smoking.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Quit

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