
Quitting smoking and managing weight

Summary

- In the long term, the average body weight of people who have quit smoking is similar to that of people who have never smoked.
 - The causes of weight gain after quitting smoking may include: the effect of nicotine withdrawal on the body (such as a slower metabolism, and the feeling of hunger pangs), increased hunger, comfort eating or replacing one hand-to-mouth action with another.
 - You would have to gain over 40 kilograms above your recommended weight to equal the risk of heart disease posed by smoking.
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Gaining weight after quitting smoking is a serious concern for some people. While most people do put on some weight when they quit, it is usually only a modest amount.

The average amount of weight that people gain after stopping smoking is about four to five kilograms over five years. Most of the weight gain occurs in the year after quitting, particularly in the first three months.

People who quit smoking can have very different experiences with weight change, ranging from those who lose weight to a minority of people who gain over ten kilograms. Research shows that in the long term, the average body weight of people who have quit smoking is similar to people who have never smoked.

Smoking appears to change the distribution of fat in women to the less healthy, typically male 'apple' pattern. What this means is that 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 greater risk of death.

When women quit smoking, any weight gain that occurs is in the normal and safer typically female pattern – around the hips rather than the waist.

The best weight management approach when quitting smoking is to focus on strategies to keep yourself healthy, rather than on weight control. This includes 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. Weight gain is typically about one kilo per month in the first three months, but it does slow down the longer you stay quit, provided you have a sensible diet. If you are gaining more than one kilogram in a month, it can be a good idea to see your doctor or dietitian for further information and advice.

Causes of weight gain when quitting smoking

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

- **eating more food** – many people who smoke 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 people who smoke to continue their habit. It is not thought to cause cancer. Nicotine speeds up the body's food processing system, the metabolism. After many years of smoking, people who smoke tend to weigh slightly less than people who do not smoke.
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Eating instead of smoking

Some people who quit smoking eat more, particularly in the first few weeks after quitting. Some of the reasons may include:

- the feeling of nicotine withdrawal can be very similar to hunger pangs. The person 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 people who have quit smoking to substitute food for cigarettes. Instead of lighting up, they eat something
- food can be comforting. If a person who has quit smoking is having a hard time during the withdrawal period, they may reward themselves with treats and snacks in an attempt to feel better
- some people who smoke 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 people who have quit smoking find that food tastes better, and this may lead to a desire to eat more.

The effect of nicotine withdrawal on the body

Researchers suggest that one of the reasons why people who quit smoking tend to put on some weight after quitting is because their metabolism slows down in the absence of nicotine. Consequently, they burn fewer kilojoules than while they were smoking.

This could explain why some people who quit smoking put on weight even if they do not eat any more than usual.

Tips on healthy eating and exercise when quitting smoking

Suggestions include:

- Exercise more often – being inactive is a risk factor for weight gain. **Australia's Physical Activity Guidelines** recommend that you do 150–300 minutes of moderate physical activity (or 75–150 minutes of vigorous physical activity) every week, and that you take some time to get active each day. Aim for around half an hour of moderate intensity activity daily, 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.
- Include muscle-strengthening activities on at least two days every week. This could include body weight exercises such as push-ups, squats or lunges that you do at home, or joining a gym and doing weights or other resistance training.
- 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 chew on sugarless gum or use a **nicotine inhalator**.
- 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.
- Be kind to yourself if you do put on a few kilos. You are boosting your health by quitting smoking.

If you put on weight after quitting smoking

If you've gained weight despite your best efforts, don't despair. A few extra kilograms are a much lower risk to your health than 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 assume that taking up smoking again would mean you would 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 **GP (doctor)**
- Your **pharmacist**
- **Dietitians Association of Australia** Tel. **1800 812 942**
- **Quitline** Tel. **13 7848** (QUIT)

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