

Nicotine Replacement Therapy - NRT

If you want to stop smoking, nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) roughly doubles your chance of success.

Nicotine is a drug that is inhaled from the tobacco in cigarettes. It gets into the bloodstream, and stimulates the brain. Most regular smokers are addicted to nicotine.

What is nicotine addiction?

If you are a smoker, when the blood level of nicotine falls, you usually develop withdrawal symptoms such as restlessness, increased appetite, inability to concentrate, irritability, dizziness, constipation, nicotine craving, or just feeling awful. These symptoms begin within a few hours after having the last cigarette. If the next cigarette does not relieve them, withdrawal symptoms get worse. If you do not smoke any more cigarettes, the withdrawal symptoms peak after about 24 hours, and then gradually ease over about 2-4 weeks.

So, most smokers smoke regularly to feel 'normal', and to prevent withdrawal symptoms.

Most smokers want to stop smoking. About 1 in 3 smokers intend to give up within a year but, without help, many fail to succeed. The main reason why so few smokers succeed, even though they want to stop smoking, is because nicotine addiction is strong and difficult to break.

What is nicotine replacement therapy (NRT)?

NRT is a way of getting nicotine into the bloodstream without smoking. There are nicotine gums, patches, inhalers, tablets, lozenges, and sprays. You can buy most of these from a pharmacy. They are also available on prescription.

How does NRT work?

NRT stops, or reduces the symptoms of nicotine withdrawal. This helps you to stop smoking, but without having unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. NRT does not 'make' you stop smoking. You still need determination to succeed in breaking the smoking habit.

How do I use NRT?

- Take advice from a doctor
- Decide on which type of NRT will suit you best (see below).
- Set a date to start. Stop smoking, and start NRT straight away. Some people prefer to stop smoking at the end of one day, and start NRT when they wake the following day.
- You should use NRT regularly at first, and not 'now and then'.
- Use an adequate dose of NRT. The higher doses are used if you smoked more than 18-20 per day.
- Use NRT for at least 8-12 weeks for the best chance of staying off smoking long term.
- The dose of NRT is typically reduced in the later part of the course, and then stopped.

You are more likely to success in keeping off cigarettes if you receive counseling or support whilst taking NRT. GPs, practice nurses, and pharmacists may all be valuable local resources of support. Also, the manufacturers of NRT often offer support such as telephone counseling, tapes, internet sites, personalized written programs, etc. The details come on the packets of the various NRT products. It is strongly advised that you take up any offer of support whilst going through the difficult time of giving up, and staying off cigarettes.

How effective is NRT?

If you really want to stop smoking, you are twice as likely to succeed in giving up with the help of NRT. This means that up to 1 in 5 smokers who are determined to stop will do it with the help of NRT. A combination of NRT with good support or counseling gives the best results.

Which form of NRT is best?

There is not much difference in how well the different types of NRT work. Personal preference usually determines which one to use. Below are listed some points about each form of NRT. Please note, this is just a brief overview. Read the manufacturer's instructions on the packet for detailed advice on each type of NRT.

Nicotine gum

This was the first NRT and is the most commonly used. Two strengths are available - 2mg and 4mg. You should use the 4mg strength if you smoked 18 or more cigarettes a day. About 12-15 pieces of gum are advised per day to start with (about 1 per hour). You should chew the gum correctly. To release the nicotine, chew the gum slowly until the taste is strong. Then rest it between the cheek and the gum to allow absorption of nicotine into the bloodstream. Chew the gum again when the taste fades, and rest it again when the taste is strong, etc. Use a fresh piece of gum after about an hour.

After 2-3 months you should use the gum less and less. For example, reduce the chewing time, cut the gum into smaller pieces, or alternate the nicotine gum with sugar-free gum. Gradually stop the gum completely.

The disadvantage of gum is that some people do not like the taste. or always having

something in their mouth. Gum is not suitable if you wear dentures.

Nicotine patches

A patch that is stuck onto the skin releases nicotine into the bloodstream. Some patches last 16 hours, which you wear only when you are awake. Other types last 24 hours, and you wear these the whole time. The 24-hour patch may disturb sleep, but is thought to help with early morning craving.

The patches come in different strengths. The manufacturers normally recommend that you gradually reduce the strength of the patch over time before stopping completely. However, research studies suggest that stopping abruptly is probably just as good without the need to gradually reduce the dose.

Patches are discreet, and easy to apply. The disadvantage of patches is that a steady amount of nicotine is delivered. This does not mimic the alternate high and low levels of nicotine when you smoke, or with chewing nicotine gum. Skin irritation beneath the patch may occur in some users.

Nicotine inhaler

This resembles a cigarette. Nicotine cartridges are inserted into it, and inhaled in an action similar to smoking. Each cartridge provides up to three 20-minute sessions. You should use about 6-12 cartridges a day for 8 weeks, and then gradually reduce over 4 further weeks. It is particularly suitable if you miss the hand-to-mouth movements of smoking.

Nicotine nasal spray

The nicotine in the spray is rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream from the nose. This form of NRT most closely mimics the rapid increase in nicotine level that you get from smoking cigarettes. This may help to relieve sudden surges of craving. Side effects such as nose and throat irritation, coughing, and watering eyes occur in about 1 in 3 users.

Can different methods of NRT be combined?

The manufacturers of NRT do not recommend combining two forms of NRT. However, combinations have been studied in research trials. Combinations may give a better chance of success, and may be advised by your doctor, if you have particularly bad withdrawal symptoms. For example, a combination of nicotine patch (that gives a regular background level of nicotine) with gum or a nasal spray (which you can take now and then to top up the level of nicotine, and ease sudden cravings).

Some other points about NRT

- Apart from causing addiction, nicotine is not thought to cause disease. The health problems from cigarettes, such as lung and heart diseases, are due to the tar, carbon monoxide, and other chemicals in cigarettes. So, taking NRT instead of smoking is one step towards a healthier life.

- The dose of nicotine in NRT is not as high as in cigarettes. Also, the nicotine from smoking is absorbed quickly, and has a more immediate effect than NRT. So, NRT is not a perfect replacement. Symptoms of withdrawal are reduced with NRT, but may not be stopped completely.
- NRT is not advised during pregnancy, and if you have certain other diseases. Always read the product label before starting NRT.
- Cost - a week's supply of NRT can vary, depending on the one you chose. NRT is also available on prescription. However, your doctor will follow guidelines when prescribing NRT. For example, a first prescription should only be issued if you are committed to giving up smoking, and further prescriptions should only be issued if you have stayed off cigarettes.
- Remember - do not smoke at the same time as taking NRT. Give up smoking at the end of one day, and start NRT first thing the next day.