

BRIGHTER FUTURES

Thinking About Quitting Smoking

Practical ways to prepare, manage cravings and get support

Plan the attempt, use the help available, try again if you need to

This guide revisits material from an earlier Brighter Futures smoking-awareness project and has been completely revised using current NHS guidance.

Revised by Brighter Futures - August 2026

Thinking about stopping?

You do not have to feel completely ready before you start thinking about quitting. Many people are uncertain, have tried before, or know that some cigarettes will be harder to give up than others.

Smoking is difficult to stop because nicotine creates dependence, but there is also a strong habit around it: the cigarette with coffee, the one after a meal, the break at work, the drive home, or the cigarette used when something feels stressful.

A useful first question is not "Can I do this perfectly?" It is "What would make my next attempt easier than the last one?"

Why people decide to quit

- to improve breathing, fitness or general health
- to protect children, partners, friends or colleagues from tobacco smoke
- to spend less money on cigarettes or tobacco
- to feel less controlled by cravings and routines
- because of pregnancy, an operation, a health condition or advice from a clinician
- simply because they no longer want to smoke

Your body starts recovering quickly

NHS guidance says changes begin soon after the last cigarette. Pulse rate starts returning towards normal within about 20 minutes; after around 48 hours carbon monoxide levels have fallen to those of a non-smoker and taste and smell are improving; over the following weeks circulation improves.

Prepare the attempt

Quitting does not have to be a test of willpower. A little preparation can remove some of the predictable difficulties before they arrive.

Choose what you are going to do

- **Pick a quit date.** Choose a day that gives you enough time to prepare but is close enough to feel real.
- **Decide what support you will use.** This might be a local Stop Smoking Service, a GP or pharmacist, nicotine replacement therapy, stop-smoking medicine, a vape, an app, or a combination.
- **Notice your most automatic cigarettes.** For a few days, write down when you smoke and what was happening just before it.
- **Change the environment.** Remove cigarettes, tobacco, ashtrays and lighters from the places where you normally reach for them.
- **Tell somebody if that will help.** Be specific about what you want from them - encouragement, distraction, or simply not offering you a cigarette.
- **Plan the first few days.** If coffee, alcohol, driving or certain breaks are strongly linked with smoking, change the routine temporarily.

A previous attempt is useful information

If you have tried before, think about where the attempt became difficult. Was it a particular time of day, withdrawal, alcohol, stress, being around other smokers, or stopping your quit aid too soon? That tells you what to plan for this time.

Use the help that suits you

There are more proven ways to stop smoking than there used to be. You do not have to choose between "cold turkey" and carrying on.

Option	How it can help
Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) Patches, gum, lozenges, inhalers and sprays	Provides nicotine without the dangerous chemicals in cigarette smoke and reduces cravings and withdrawal. A slow-acting patch plus a faster-acting product can be particularly useful.
Stop-smoking medicines Examples include varenicline, cytisine and bupropion	These medicines do not contain nicotine. They can reduce cravings or make smoking less rewarding. Availability and suitability vary, so ask a GP or Stop Smoking Service.
Nicotine vapes	For adults who smoke, vaping can be an effective way to quit. It is likely to be far less harmful than smoking, but it is not risk-free and is not recommended for non-smokers. The full health benefit comes from stopping cigarettes completely.
Professional support	A trained stop-smoking adviser can help you choose products, plan for triggers and stay on track. NHS Better Health says professional or expert support can make people about three times more likely to quit for good.

Do not guess which treatment is safe for you

If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, under 18, have a significant health condition, or take regular prescription medicines, ask a GP, pharmacist, midwife or Stop Smoking Service what is appropriate for you.

Cravings and triggers

Some cravings come from nicotine withdrawal; others come from routines that your brain has linked with smoking. Knowing which kind you are dealing with can make them feel less mysterious.

Common triggers include coffee, finishing a meal, driving, work breaks, alcohol, particular people, boredom, stress and seeing somebody else smoke.

When a craving arrives

NHS Better Health notes that an individual craving may last up to about 15 minutes. You do not have to solve the rest of your life during those minutes; you only need to get through that particular urge.

- **Delay.** Tell yourself you will wait ten minutes before deciding anything.
- **Change what you are doing.** Move somewhere else or start a small task.
- **Use your quit aid.** If you are using fast-acting NRT or a vape as part of your quit attempt, use it as advised rather than waiting until the craving is overwhelming.
- **Occupy your hands or mouth.** Water, sugar-free gum or a simple task can interrupt the old routine.
- **Breathe more slowly.** A few deliberate breaths can create enough space to let the strongest part of the urge pass.

Alcohol can make an early quit attempt harder

For some people alcohol lowers resolve and is strongly associated with smoking. If that is true for you, cutting down or avoiding alcohol for the first part of your quit attempt may make things easier.

What the first weeks may feel like

When nicotine levels fall, your body and brain have to adjust. Withdrawal is one reason quitting can feel uncomfortable even when you very much want to stop.

Possible temporary symptoms include:

- strong urges to smoke
- irritability or feeling on edge
- restlessness
- difficulty concentrating
- changes in sleep
- feeling hungrier than usual
- feeling low or emotionally unsettled

Other changes can be surprising

Some people cough more or notice extra phlegm for a while as their airways clear. Taste and smell can improve, which may increase appetite. Some weight gain after quitting is common, but the health benefits of stopping smoking are much greater than the risks associated with a modest change in weight.

Do not stop your quit aid too early just because you are doing well

NRT is commonly used for around 12 weeks, or for as long as it is needed to prevent a return to smoking. Follow the instructions for the product or advice from your pharmacist, GP or stop-smoking adviser.

If your mood becomes very difficult to manage, or you are worried about physical symptoms, speak to an appropriate health professional rather than trying to push through alone.

If you smoke again

A cigarette after a quit attempt does not erase the effort you have already made. It does, however, give you useful information about what happened just before it.

Ask yourself:

- Where was I?
- Who was I with?
- What was I feeling?
- Had I stopped using my quit aid?
- Was alcohol involved?
- Was this a planned decision or an automatic one?
- What could I put in place for the same situation next time?

Restart quickly rather than waiting for a perfect Monday, month or New Year. One cigarette does not have to become a full return to smoking.

Tell clinicians when your smoking status changes

Tobacco smoke affects how some medicines are processed by the body. If you take regular prescription medicines, tell your GP, pharmacist or specialist if you stop, substantially reduce, restart or increase smoking. Some medicines may need monitoring or a dose review.

Pregnancy

If you are pregnant, stopping smoking benefits both you and your baby at any stage of pregnancy. NHS guidance recommends asking a midwife, GP, pharmacist or specialist stop-smoking adviser about the safest support. Licensed NRT can be used in pregnancy when needed with professional advice.

Make your quit plan

Write down a plan you can actually use. It does not need to sound impressive; it needs to help when you are tired, busy or having a difficult day.

My main reasons for stopping are:
My quit date is:
The cigarettes I expect to miss most are:
The support or quit products I plan to use are:
My three biggest triggers are:
When those triggers happen, I will:
The person or service I can contact for support is:

Keep the plan somewhere visible

A plan is most useful before a craving, not after it. Put it on your phone, fridge, desk or somewhere else you are likely to see it during the first few weeks.

Support and further information

You are more likely to succeed when you use effective support rather than relying on willpower alone. Free stop-smoking help is available in England.

Smokefree National Helpline: 0300 123 1044

Find a local Stop Smoking Service:

nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/ready-to-quit-smoking/find-your-local-stop-smoking-service/

NHS Better Health - Quit smoking:

nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/

NHS - Using e-cigarettes to stop smoking:

nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/using-e-cigarettes-to-stop-smoking/

NHS Better Health - Nicotine replacement therapies:

nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/ready-to-quit-smoking/quit-with-nicotine-replacement-therapies-nrt/

NHS Better Health - Nicotine-free medicines:

nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking/ready-to-quit-smoking/quit-with-nicotine-free-medicines/

NHS - Stop smoking in pregnancy:

nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/stop-smoking/

About this guide

This resource is intended for general information and practical self-help. It is not a diagnosis, prescription or substitute for individual medical advice.

This edition replaces an earlier Rainbow Action Group booklet on giving up smoking. Useful ideas from that booklet - identifying triggers, preparing for difficult situations, seeking support and reviewing reasons for quitting - have been retained in revised form. Outdated quotations, service information and health claims have been removed.

Brighter Futures

Community wellbeing, creativity and connection in East Sussex

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