

Smoking and your heart health



Key points about smoking and your heart health

- Smoking kills more than 22,000 Australians a year.¹
- Breathing other people's smoke (second-hand smoke) is harmful to smokers and non-smokers, especially children and babies
- Quitting smoking takes persistence but, like learning to ride a bike or drive a car, you can do it with planning, practice and help. Don't give up.
- The safety of e-cigarettes for use instead of a tobacco cigarette is unclear at this time. The best thing you can do for your health is quit smoking.

Why is smoking bad for my health?

As well as causing cancer, smoking affects the arteries that supply blood to your heart and other parts of your body.

- Smoking makes your blood 'stickier', causing blood cells to clump together. This slows blood flow through your arteries and makes blockages more common. Blockages may cause heart attack or stroke.
- Smoking makes your artery walls sticky, causing them to become clogged with fatty material called 'plaque' or 'atheroma'. The fatty material slowly builds up on the inner wall of the arteries, causing them to narrow. If your arteries become too narrow, the blood flow through the artery is reduced. If the clogged artery is carrying blood to your heart, it can cause temporary chest discomfort or pain (angina) that usually happens during physical activity and goes away after a few minutes of rest. If a blood clot forms in the narrowed artery to your heart and completely blocks the blood supply to a part of your heart, it can cause a heart attack.
- Within seconds of lighting a cigarette, thousands of chemicals enter your bloodstream. Some of these chemicals damage the delicate lining of your arteries. This can lead to clots that can suddenly block your arteries, causing heart attack or stroke.
- Smoking causes spasms in the arteries carrying blood to your heart, which can make your heartbeat irregular (arrhythmia).

Is smoking bad for other people's health?

- Yes. The smoke from the burning end of a cigarette and the smoke you exhale can harm people around you who involuntarily inhale the smoke (passive smoking). Research shows that passive smoking can cause heart disease, stroke, lung cancer and a range of respiratory conditions, including increased frequency and severity of asthma.²⁻⁴

The risks

Smoking can:

- increase your chance of heart disease by 2-3 times⁵
- increase your chance of stroke by three times.⁶

Cigarette smoke contains thousands of chemicals including:

- nicotine – an addictive drug that affects brain and muscle activity, and increases your blood pressure, making your heart work harder
- carbon monoxide – a poisonous gas that replaces oxygen in your blood, making your heart beat faster
- tar – a sticky substance that coats your lungs like soot in a chimney, making it harder for you to breathe, and that contains dozens of chemicals that cause cancer.



How will quitting smoking help me?

Within one day of quitting smoking:

- your heart rate slows down and your blood pressure drops slightly
- carbon monoxide is out of your blood
- oxygen levels in your blood rise.

Within 2-3 months:

- your sense of smell and taste improves
- your lungs regain the ability to clean themselves
- the blood flow to your hands and feet improves.

Within one year:

- your chance of a heart attack is halved.⁷

Within 2-6 years:

- your risk of developing disease in the arteries carrying blood to your heart returns to a similar level as that of a non-smoker.⁸

Quitting smoking takes persistence but you can do it with planning, practice and help.

How do I quit smoking?

Quitting smoking takes persistence but you can do it with planning, practice and help.

- Contact the Quitline on 13 78 48 or online at www.icanquit.com.au for information and advice about quitting smoking.
- Think about your habits that trigger your desire to smoke, and be prepared.
- Choose the best way for you to quit; this includes support from your general practitioner, trained health professional, family and friends, and the use of nicotine replacement products or quitting medication that helps to reduce the craving for cigarettes.
- Prepare for quitting by setting a date, get rid of your cigarettes and practise quitting (make your car or home smoke free, try not smoking when you normally would, refuse all offers of cigarettes from others).
- Keep trying. If you slip up and start smoking again, learn from your quit attempt and have another go.

E-cigarettes

Electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) are new products designed to copy the act of smoking. Some look like tobacco cigarettes and others look like pens or small pipes. They are battery powered devices that heat a capsule of liquid so that it can be inhaled as a vapour into your lungs. By breathing the vapour in and out, it mimics the action of smoking a cigarette.

The safety of e-cigarettes is unclear at this time and needs more research. For this reason, many governments have regulated their use to prevent children and non-smokers from taking them up. E-cigarettes that contain nicotine could potentially be used like other forms of nicotine replacement therapy to help smokers quit smoking. An e-cigarette for this purpose needs to be approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) to ensure they are safe and effective. It is illegal to sell and use e-cigarettes containing nicotine that have not been approved by the TGA.

Want to know more?

For more information, call our Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87 and talk to one of our trained health professionals. You can also visit www.heartfoundation.org.au

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For heart health information,
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