

IT'S TIME TO QUIT!

Interview with Dr. Michael Couturie
Clinic Doctor in Beijing



Tobacco is a killer. Smokers and other tobacco users are more likely to develop certain diseases and die earlier than those who do not use tobacco. If you smoke, you may worry about what it's doing to your health and how hard it might be to quit. In this interview Dr Michael Couturie answers some common questions on quitting smoking.

What are some of the recommended ways to help a person quit smoking?

Research consistently shows that a multifaceted approach leads to the best chances of success. Medication for smoking cessation aims to reduce the symptoms of nicotine withdrawal, however, smoking is both a learned behaviour AND a physical addiction and changing the behaviour is more challenging than dealing with the withdrawal symptoms. Thus support and counselling should be a key part of any person's plan to quit.

What is your opinion about nicotine patches and gums? Do you think they are effective ways to help a person quit? Why or why not?

Patches and gum do reduce withdrawal symptoms and research bears this out as well. Nicotine replacement therapy increases quit rates at six months as much as two-fold and while no individual method has been shown to be superior to another, the combination of a long-acting method (patch) plus a short-acting method (gum) has been shown to be better. These are great for people who smoke with physical addictions and should be offered to anyone willing to make a quit attempt unless medically contraindicated.

For most people who smoke, a pattern of behaviour has developed over years, with positive reinforcement at the level of their brain chemistry not only from the nicotine itself, but in various and complicated ways from our cultures, our peers and ourselves.

Tobacco addiction is like any other addiction in that it convinces the user that they are in control even as they cede more control over to the addiction. I would literally schedule my day around cigarettes, but for most of my smoking life, I considered myself in control, able to stop when I wanted to. People come into my office worried about the pollution but with a pack of cigarettes in their shirt pocket almost every week. They know the contradiction, but the greater health risk by far has already been normalised for them, internalised and codified as to who they are.

What are eCigarettes and can they help smokers quit?

E-cigarettes (electronic cigarettes) were invented in China in 2003 and brought to international markets a few years later. It is an electronic nicotine delivery system that uses a battery to vaporise a liquid that users inhale. As the product has only been around for a short time, the long-term health effects are unknown.

However, there is little evidence to support their effectiveness as a tool to help smokers quit. In one

study, the effectiveness was about equal to people who quit smoking with the nicotine replacement patch. There is also concern that electronic cigarettes will introduce previous non-smokers (especially teenagers) to an addictive substance which may lead to increased smoking of traditional cigarettes. Thus, it is difficult to recommend electronic cigarettes as a tool to quit smoking when other methods are available and the long-term risks are unknown.

What kind of mental, emotional or even physical challenges can a smoker expect to face on their way to becoming smoke-free?

Nicotine withdrawal can cause people to have trouble sleeping; be more irritable; more easily frustrated or even feel like they are not thinking clearly. Some people gain a couple of kilograms. And you can expect to cough for a few months as your lungs begin to heal.

The real problems are not so much about withdrawal but about unlearning all of the rituals of tobacco use.

I know when I smoked I looked forward to the first cigarette of the morning with my coffee and the last cigarette after dinner. Changing those habits probably made me more irritable than actual withdrawal symptoms and is rarely easy. It can also be challenging to maintain a commitment to not smoking when others around you are.

Does the severity of those challenges depend on how long a person has been a smoker?

The longer we perform any pattern of behaviour the more automatic it becomes, and most people who smoke quit several times before quitting for good. The more cigarettes you smoke daily, the more likely you are to have a physical addiction, but even those who smoke 2–3 cigarettes a day (and are thus likely not physically addicted) have patterns of behaviour that can end up trapping them.

How long can a smoker expect to face these challenges before feeling "normal" again?

Most people who stop smoking for six months stay off, but that's not the same as feeling normal. At six months, most people feel physically better than they

did before — more stamina, less cough, they don't smell like an ashtray, they can taste food again and their energy improves.

Smoking changes how we think about smoking and how we think about ourselves, just like any regular habit. We codify the behaviour and set it as a norm for ourselves. Working to build a new normal is one of the most challenging parts of quitting smoking.

What are some helpful methods a smoker can practice to overcome these challenges?

Every person who smokes should work with his supporters (doctors, counsellors, friends, family) to identify their smoking triggers and plan for ways to cope for situations where they would usually smoke.



Exercise is an excellent way to release tension, overcome smoking urges and relieve withdrawal symptoms. Walking is great exercise for almost all fitness levels. Current recommendations for most people include aiming for at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise most days of the week. Ask your doctor about the best level of activity for you.



One quick and easy strategy is to use **Relaxation Breathing Techniques** whenever you feel yourself getting tense. Most counsellors can teach you different types of breathing techniques in more detail.



Change your routines. Take a different route to work. Drink tea instead of coffee. It might seem counter-intuitive that additional changes to routines will decrease stress, but by developing new, smoke-free routines, you are smoothing the way for long-term success.



Reward yourself. Successfully quitting smoking has rewards — better health, improved ability to smell and taste food, a feeling of accomplishment, better hygiene — but these rewards often don't come quickly enough to satisfy the immediate reward impulse that you've been feeding with cigarettes. Set up some rewards to keep you motivated:

- Stay in bed late and read or watch television
- Buy something practical
- Buy something frivolous
- Take yourself out to dinner
- Invite a friend to a movie ■

