

PERSONAL HEALTH ■ JANE E. BRODY

Quit stalling

Plan to become an ex-smoker for good

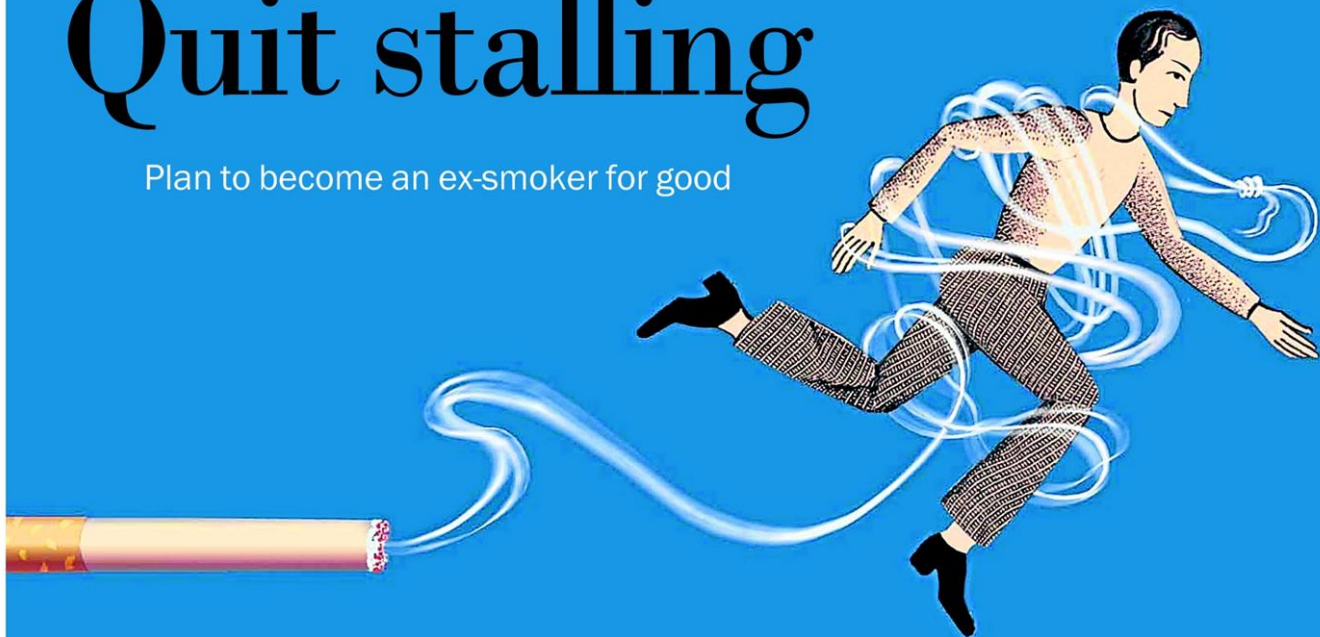


ILLUSTRATION © 2012 THE NEW YORK TIMES

Few smokers would claim that it's easy to quit. The addiction to nicotine is strong and repeatedly reinforced by circumstances that prompt smokers to light up.

Yet the millions who have successfully quit are proof that a smoke-free life is achievable, even by those who have been regular, even heavy, smokers for decades.

Today, 19% of US adults smoke, down from more than 42% half a century ago, when Luther Terry, the US surgeon-general, formed a committee to produce the first official report on the health effects of smoking. Ever-increasing restrictions on where people can smoke have helped to swell the ranks of former smokers.

Now, however, with the American Cancer Society's 37th Great American Smokeout last Thursday, the decline in

adult smoking has stalled despite the economic downturn and the soaring price of cigarettes.

Currently, 45 million Americans are regular smokers who, if they remain smokers, can on average expect to live 10 fewer years. Half will die of a tobacco-related disease, and many others will suffer for years with smoking-caused illness. Even as some adult smokers quit, their ranks are being swelled by the 800,000 teenagers who become regular smokers each year and by young adults who, through advertising and giveaways, are now the prime targets.

People between the ages of 18-25 have that nation's highest smoking rate: 40%. I had to hold my breath the other day as dozens of 20-somethings streamed out of art gallery openings and lit up. Do they not know how easy it is to get hooked on nicotine and how challenging it can

be to escape this addiction?

Challenging, yes, but by no means impossible. On the web you can download a "Guide to Quitting Smoking", with detailed descriptions of all the tools and tips to help you become an ex-smoker once and for all.

Or consult the new book by Dr Richard Brunswick, a retired family physician in

“Perhaps most important is to be sure you are serious about quitting; if not, wait until you are

Northampton, Massachusetts, who says he's helped hundreds of people escape the clutches of nicotine and smoking. (The book's provocative title is *Can't Quit? Bulls---! You Can Stop Smoking.*)

"There is no magic pill or formula for beating back nicotine addiction," Dr Brunswick said. "However, with a better understanding of why you smoke and the different tools you can use to control the urge to light up, you can stop being a slave to your cigarettes."

Nicotine beats a direct path to the brain, where it provides both relaxation and a small energy boost. But few smokers realise that the stress and lethargy they are trying to relieve are a result of nicotine withdrawal, not some underlying distress. Break the addiction, and the ill feelings are likely to dissipate.

Physical withdrawal from nicotine is short-lived. Four days without it and the worst is over, with remaining symptoms gone within a month, Brunswick said. But emotional and circumstantial tugs to smoke can last much longer.

Depending on when and why you smoke, cues can include needing a break from work, having to focus on a challenging task, drinking coffee or alcohol, being with other people who smoke or in places you associate with smoking, finishing a meal or sexual activity, and feeling depressed or upset.

To break such links, you must first identify them and then replace them with other activities, like taking a walk, chewing sugar-free gum or taking deep breaths. These can help you control cravings until the urge passes.

If you've failed at quitting before, try to identify what went wrong and do things differently this time, Dr Brunswick suggests. Most smokers need several attempts before they can become permanent ex-smokers.

Perhaps most important is to be sure you are serious about quitting; if not, wait until you are. Motivation is half the battle. Also, should you slip and have a cigarette after days or weeks of not smoking, don't assume you've failed and give up. Just go right back to not smoking.

Many if not most smokers need two kinds of assistance to become lasting ex-smokers: psychological support and medicinal aids. Only about 4 to 7% of

people are able to quit smoking on any given attempt without help, the cancer society says.

Online support groups and Nicotine Anonymous can help put you in touch with counsellors and plan a stop-smoking method for you. Local hospitals and doctors should also be a good source of advice. Consider telling relatives and friends about your intention to quit, and plan to spend time in smoke-free settings.

More than a dozen treatments can help you break the physical addiction to tobacco. The most popular is nicotine replacement therapy, sold both with and without a prescription. The FDA has approved five types: nicotine patches of varying strengths, gums, sprays, inhalers and lozenges that can curb withdrawal symptoms and help you gradually reduce your dependence on nicotine.

Two prescription drugs are also effective: an extended-release form of the antidepressant bupropion (Zyban or Wellbutrin), which reduces nicotine cravings, and varenicline (Chantix), which blocks nicotine receptors in the brain, reducing both the pleasurable effects of smoking and the symptoms of nicotine withdrawal. Combining a nicotine replacement with one of these drugs is often more effective than either approach alone.

The cancer society suggests picking a "quit day"; ridding your home, car and workplace of smoking paraphernalia; choosing a stop-smoking plan; and stocking up on whatever aids you may need.

On the chosen day, keep active; drink lots of water and juices; use a nicotine replacement; change your routine if possible; and avoid alcohol, situations you associate with smoking and people who are smoking. © 2012 THE NEW YORK TIMES