Nicotine gum

Please note: This information is not intended to replace the Consumer Medicine Information (pack insert) that may come with the nicotine gum. If you do not have a pack insert, ask your pharmacist for it, or for advice if one is not available.

Main points about nicotine replacement therapy products

- All forms of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) products – patches, lozenges, mouth spray, gum and inhalator – have been proven to help people quit smoking.¹
- Using NRT products is always safer than continuing to smoke.² NRT products are a safe alternative to cigarettes for smokers.³
- Using NRT products will still increase your chances of quitting even if it does not completely control cravings.⁴
- NRT products reduce the severity of cravings but you may still have them, especially in situations in which you are used to smoking.⁵⁻⁷
- Using the patch plus another NRT product (combination therapy) increases your chance of stopping smoking compared to just using one NRT product, and is better at suppressing cravings.⁸⁻⁹
- NRT products work better when you also reduce triggers for cravings. Boost your chance of success by making your home smokefree and if possible, get rid of all cigarettes in your home and car.¹⁰⁻¹¹ You will also need to find new habits to take the place of smoking; for example, when you’re stressed, socialising, concentrating, filling in time or when drinking alcohol or coffee.
- Research shows that people who have the best chance of stopping smoking using NRT products also get advice or support from their doctor, pharmacist or other trained advisor (such as through the Quitline).¹,¹²,¹³
- If you slip-up and have a cigarette, it is safe to continue using NRT products and to keep trying to quit.¹⁴
- It is common for smokers to attempt to quit a number of times before they successfully stop.¹⁵
Is nicotine gum suitable for me?

Nicotine gum works best for addicted smokers who want to quit. Your doctor or pharmacist can advise you whether nicotine gum is suitable for you.

Signs of addiction include:
- You smoke your first cigarette within 30 minutes of waking up.\textsuperscript{12, 16}
- You smoke more than 10 cigarettes per day.\textsuperscript{12, 16} (There is no difference between smoking stronger or weaker tasting cigarettes.\textsuperscript{17})
- You suffer from withdrawal symptoms within 24 hours of stopping smoking, such as cravings, irritability, anxiety, depression, restlessness, hunger, poor concentration or sleep disturbances.\textsuperscript{12, 18}

It is not clear how helpful nicotine gum may be to smokers of 10 or less cigarettes per day, but use of a support service (such as the Quitline) and self-help materials is encouraged.\textsuperscript{1, 12, 15}

If you are age 12 years and over, you may use nicotine gum. However, if you are under 18 years you should speak to your doctor before using the gum. People in this age group need to discuss stopping smoking with a trained health advisor to get any benefit from using nicotine gum.\textsuperscript{12, 15, 19, 20}

How does nicotine gum work?

Addiction to nicotine in tobacco is the main reason why people continue to smoke. The gum works by replacing some of the nicotine you would normally inhale from cigarettes.\textsuperscript{21} It consists of nicotine mixed with chewing gum. Chewing the gum releases nicotine, which is then absorbed through the lining of your mouth.\textsuperscript{6, 22}

Using the gum can help to reduce withdrawal symptoms when you quit, such as cravings, irritability, and anxiety.\textsuperscript{6, 23, 24} However, it may not stop these symptoms completely.\textsuperscript{6} More options are listed below under Why may I still have cravings while using the gum?

Buying the gum

You can buy nicotine gum without prescription from pharmacies, most supermarkets and online. You can also buy the gum with a prescription from your doctor through the Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme (PBS), which is cheaper.
There are two different strengths of gum, 2 mg and 4 mg. There are different
flavours, including classic flavour, fruit and mint, and various pack sizes. If you buy it
over-the-counter, pack sizes range from 15 pieces of gum costing about $11,
to 144 pieces costing about $64 (based on recommended retail prices as at March
2019). Store prices can be a few dollars higher or lower.

Both the 4 mg and 2 mg gum are listed on the PBS. You can buy one 12 week course
of either the nicotine patches, lozenges or gum through the PBS per year. To get
the prescription, you must take part in a quit smoking support program, such as that
provided by the Quitline. Your doctor will give you a prescription that will last four
weeks on your first visit, and then, on your second visit, two repeat prescriptions for
a further eight weeks of gum. Remember to book your second appointment with
your doctor before your first prescription runs out. In 2019, general patients pay
$40.30 (PBS price) for each 4 week prescription (216 pieces of gum) and concession
holders pay $6.50.

How well does the gum work?

People who use the nicotine gum are more likely to quit and stay stopped. Nicotine
gum (4 mg) also appears to delay the weight gain which may occur after stopping
smoking, but doesn’t have a lasting effect beyond its use.15

When using the gum, you take in less nicotine at a much slower rate than when
smoking. This makes it less addictive and easier to stop using than cigarettes, but it
is slower at easing cravings than a cigarette.1, 3, 21, 23, 27 Cravings are usually lessened
after about 15 to 20 minutes of chewing the gum.6 Over a day, gum users typically
absorb about one-third (2 mg gum) or two-thirds (4 mg gum) of the dose of nicotine
that they would get from smoking a pack of cigarettes per day.20

Which strength of gum should I use?

Your pharmacist or doctor can advise you what strength of gum is suitable for you. If
you smoke less than 20 cigarettes per day, the product information recommends the
2 mg gum. The 4 mg gum is recommended if you smoke over 20 cigarettes per day,
or if you have not been able to quit using 2 mg gum.19, 20 Some research suggests
that if you usually smoke within 30 minutes of waking, the 4 mg gum may work
better for you than the 2 mg gum.9, 28
What do I need to tell my pharmacist or doctor?

Before buying the gum, you should tell your pharmacist or doctor if you have an illness, or if you are taking any other medicines (even non-prescription ones). In some cases, you may need medical supervision or advice, or in other cases nicotine gum may not be suitable. Please check the Consumer Medicine Information (pack insert) that comes with the gum for the latest list of common medicines and medical conditions that may be affected by using the gum or stopping smoking.

Illnesses for which you may need medical advice include: heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, any blood circulation disorder, epilepsy or seizures, gastric problems (food pipe and stomach), kidney disease, liver disease, overactive thyroid gland, diabetes, and phaeochromocytoma (a tumour of the adrenal gland).

You should not use the gum when your mouth or throat is sore. Nicotine gum may stick to and damage dentures, fillings and dental implants, and it may be better to use a different nicotine product instead. Some brands contain sodium and/or sorbitol. If these ingredients are an issue for you, talk to your pharmacist about which product would best suit you.

Can I use the gum if I am pregnant or breastfeeding?

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, it is recommended that you first try to quit without medication. Your Quitline counsellor can offer you practical advice and support, no matter where you’re at with your smoking.

If you are unable to quit without medication, you may use the gum to help you stop smoking. You need to discuss the risks and benefits with your pharmacist or doctor before using it, and you should tell the doctor supervising your pregnancy.

While using the gum is considered safer than smoking, even this smaller amount of nicotine may not be entirely risk-free for your baby. Mothers using the gum should breastfeed their baby first, then use the gum soon after. This allows time for the nicotine in their breastmilk to decrease before the next feed.

If you have any questions regarding these issues, please ask your doctor.
Using the gum

Problems to avoid

Don’t chew nicotine gum like ordinary chewing gum – it won’t work properly. Chew the gum slowly, until you feel a tingling sensation or a ‘peppery’ taste (usually after about 10 chews). Then rest it for one minute under your tongue, or between your cheek and teeth. This allows the nicotine to pass through the lining of your mouth. You should continue this ‘chew - rest’ sequence for 30 minutes, then throw away the gum.22, 23, 30

You should avoid eating and drinking 15 minutes before, and during, use of the gum (except for water). Acidic foods or drinks, such as orange juice, coffee, beer and soft drink, interfere with the amount of nicotine passing through the lining of your mouth from the gum.22, 23, 30

Using the gum

Once you’ve bought the gum, it can help to set a quit date.34 Use the gum when you feel the urge to smoke, or every one to two hours.20, 22 You will have more chance of success with the gum if you use it regularly throughout the day as well as when you have cravings.6, 35 Most people need about eight to 12 pieces of the 2 mg gum or six to 10 pieces of the 4 mg gum per day.12, 19 After 12 weeks, you may reduce the number of pieces of gum per day over the following weeks. You should not use more than 10 pieces of 4 mg gum, or 20 pieces of 2 mg gum, in one day.19, 20

Remember: Nicotine gum is a medicine and you should use it according to the advice from your pharmacist or doctor.

Using combination therapy

Combination therapy means using two types of nicotine products, such as the nicotine patch and nicotine gum, at the same time. Research shows that using combination therapy increases your chances of quitting and is better at suppressing cravings compared to using one product alone.8, 9

In general, combination therapy is a good option for people who smoke 15 or more cigarettes per day.9, 12, 14

You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist first before using combination therapy. They may recommend combination therapy if you have had cravings or not succeeded in quitting when using a single nicotine replacement therapy product in the past.19, 20
Combination therapy has been approved for the use of:

- the 25 mg or 15 mg 16 hour patch, or the 21 mg 24 hour patch with
- the 2 mg gum, 1.5 mg mini lozenge, 2 mg lozenge, mouth spray, or the nicotine inhalator.\textsuperscript{36, 37}

After applying the patch to reduce withdrawal symptoms, nicotine gum is used to relieve cravings, which can be triggered by old smoking situations or emotions.\textsuperscript{6} The pack insert recommends using at least four pieces of gum per day, and no more than 12 pieces per day. It tells you how long you should use them and how to stop using them.\textsuperscript{22, 29}

Nicotine patches, gum or lozenges are available with a doctor’s prescription through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), making them much cheaper. Currently you can have one 12 week course of one NRT product through the PBS per year.

\textbf{Why may I still have cravings while using the gum?}

You may still have cravings while using the gum because:

- You may not be using it properly. Read the above section \textit{Using the gum} and the pack insert to avoid common problems.
- You may not be getting enough nicotine from the gum. If your cravings are bad and do not lessen within 20 minutes of starting use of the gum, you could consider other options.\textsuperscript{6} These include using more or a higher dose of the gum, or using combination therapy. Speak to your pharmacist or doctor, if you think this is a likely cause of your cravings.
- You have an urge or desire to smoke when you are in situations where you are used to smoking.

Certain things may trigger cravings, such as:\textsuperscript{38}

- \textbf{places} where you normally smoke, such as home, work, or the pub
- \textbf{people} who you usually smoke with, such as family or friends; or being alone
- \textbf{habits or routines} where you are used to smoking, such as when drinking coffee or alcohol, talking on the telephone, after meals, or when you want to relax
- \textbf{emotions}, such as stress, boredom, being tense or upset; or for some people, when they are happy.
You need to understand why you smoke in order to plan ways to deal with these situations. People most successful at resisting urges to smoke use a range of coping strategies to help them. Making your home smokefree, avoiding trigger situations where possible in the first few weeks, and getting rid of cigarettes in your home and car are all helpful strategies. The Quitline (13 7848) offers practical advice and support for the usual cost of a local call on your phone.

**Using nicotine gum to cut down, then quit**

You can use the nicotine gum, mouth spray, inhalator, lozenge or mini lozenge while cutting down the number of cigarettes you smoke before stopping completely. Combined with using a support service, this method is recommended for smokers who are not ready or unable to quit.

The aim of this method is to stop smoking completely. There is no clear evidence that cutting down, without ever actually quitting, has health benefits in the long term.

The first step is to start using the nicotine gum and cut down the number of cigarettes you smoke per day as much as you can over six weeks. Cutting down by half or more is a good goal. Then as soon as you feel ready, you stop smoking cigarettes altogether. From this point on you use it as directed on the pack or in *Using the gum* above. The Quitline (13 7848) can offer you advice on cutting down and provide support when you want to stop completely. If you haven’t tried to stop smoking by six months you should speak to your doctor or pharmacist.

Evidence suggests that using the nicotine gum to reduce your smoking is safe and does not increase serious side effects. Provided you reduce your smoking while using the gum, the level of nicotine in your blood is likely to be no higher than when you were smoking only. Some people may have side effects similar to using nicotine gum to stop smoking altogether (described below).

If you are not ready to quit, the ‘cut down then quit’ method used with a support service will increase your chance of quitting in the long term. But if you are ready to quit, using nicotine replacement therapy products to stop smoking altogether offers a better chance of success at quitting than the cut down method.
Side effects of nicotine gum

Common side effects of the gum include hiccups, cough, sore mouth or throat, headache, stomach upsets and nausea. Some of these symptoms may be relieved by chewing more slowly and resting the gum more often. Most users rate these reactions as mild. If side effects do not fade within a few weeks, or they worry you, see your pharmacist or doctor.

Serious side effects are rare, and are described in the Consumer Medicine Information (pack insert) that comes with the gum. If you have these symptoms, follow the instructions in the pack insert and see a doctor as soon as possible. These symptoms can occur from absorbing too much nicotine, so do not smoke.

Safety of nicotine gum

Using the nicotine gum is always safer than continuing to smoke. Tobacco smoke contains many cancer-causing substances, carbon monoxide and other dangerous chemicals, which the nicotine gum does not. The gum does not increase the risk of heart attack in smokers who have stable heart disease. Pregnant women should talk to their doctor before deciding whether to use a nicotine replacement therapy product.

It is important to store and dispose of the gum so that children and animals cannot get it, as it can be dangerous for them.

What do I do if I start smoking again despite using nicotine gum?

If you slip-up and have a puff or a cigarette, don’t let it lead you back to full-time smoking. It is safe to keep using the gum and re-commit to stopping smoking. Think of your reasons for quitting and what you have achieved so far. Call the Quitline if you want to discuss your smoking.

Think about getting some extra help if you are trying to stop smoking using the gum and:

- you are smoking a similar number of cigarettes as usual and you feel you’re not making progress towards stopping, or
- you are still smoking after using the gum for three months, even if it’s just now and then.

Your doctor or the Quitline can help you address what’s stopping you from quitting and discuss further options.
It is common for smokers to attempt to quit a number of times before successfully staying stopped, even when using the gum or other nicotine replacement therapy products. For many people, re-adjusting to living without cigarettes is a learning process. It may take a while to figure out alternatives to cigarettes in certain situations. The purpose of the gum is to ease nicotine withdrawal symptoms while you deal with other aspects of quitting smoking.

If you have found the nicotine gum useful in quitting smoking, but have taken up smoking again, you should consider using the gum and/or another nicotine replacement therapy product when you quit again.

Who can I talk to for more information?

- Your doctor is an important source of information, particularly if you have an illness, or you are taking any other medicines.
- Your pharmacist can give you advice about stopping smoking.
- Quitline 13 7848: The Quitline is a friendly, confidential telephone service. Your Quitline counsellor is trained to listened carefully and provide practical advice just for you. You can call the Quitline for the usual cost of a local call from your phone or ask us to call you at no cost (Quitline callback). Talking with a Quitline counsellor can increase your chance of stopping smoking successfully.

Online resources

**Quit website** [www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au). Build your personal quit plan with easy-to-find information suited to you. You’ll find tips, distractions, a cost calculator and stories from ex-smokers.

**QuitCoach** [www.quitcoach.org.au](http://www.quitcoach.org.au). QuitCoach is a free web-based computer program that asks you questions and helps you quit by giving free personal advice tailored to your needs.

**QuitTxt** provides regular SMS messages including tips and encouragement to help you keep on track throughout your quit attempt. To begin, all you need to do is register and complete a brief questionnaire at [www.quit.org.au/quittxt](http://www.quit.org.au/quittxt).
References


