Nicotine patches

Please note: This information is not intended to replace the Consumer Medicine Information (pack insert) that should come with the nicotine patch. 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 nicotine 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 the nicotine patch suitable for me?

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

Signs of addiction include:

- You smoke your first cigarette within 30 minutes of waking up.\(^1\)\(^{12,16}\)
- You smoke more than 10 cigarettes per day.\(^1\)\(^{12,16}\) (There is no difference between smoking stronger or weaker tasting cigarettes.\(^17\))
- You suffer from withdrawal symptoms within 24 hours of stopping smoking, such as cravings, irritability, anxiety, depression, restlessness, hunger, poor concentration or sleep disturbances.\(^1\)\(^{12,18}\)

It is not clear how helpful the nicotine patch 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.\(^1\)\(^{12,15}\)

If you are age 12 years and over, you may use the nicotine patch. However, if you are under 18 years you should speak to your doctor before using the patch. People in this age group need to discuss stopping smoking with a trained health advisor to get any benefit from using the nicotine patch.\(^1\)\(^{12,15,19,20}\)

How does the nicotine patch work?

Addiction to nicotine in tobacco is the main reason why people continue to smoke. The patch works by replacing some of the nicotine you would normally inhale from cigarettes.\(^{21}\) You wear the patch on your skin, where it slowly releases nicotine, which is absorbed into your body.\(^{21}\)

Using the patch can help to reduce withdrawal symptoms when you quit, such as cravings, irritability, anxiety and difficulty concentrating.\(^6\)\(^{22-24}\) However, it may not stop these symptoms completely.\(^6\) More options are listed below under Why may I still have cravings while using the patch?
Buying the nicotine patch

You can buy the nicotine patch without prescription from pharmacies, most supermarkets and online. You can also buy patches with a prescription from your doctor through the Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme (PBS), which is cheaper.

There are two different types of patches. There are 24 hour patches, which come in three strengths of 21 mg, 14 mg, or 7 mg of nicotine. Also, there are 16 hour patches that you only wear during the daytime, which come in three strengths of 25 mg, 15 mg, or 10 mg of nicotine. The patches vary in size, with the bigger patches having the higher dose of nicotine. Some patches are clear so they are less visible.

All strengths of 24 hour patches and the 25mg 16 hour patch 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 patches. 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 and concession holders pay $6.50.

Patches are sold in packets of 7, 14 or 28. A packet of 7 patches bought over-the-counter costs between $40 to $60, depending on the brand of the patch (based on the recommended retail prices, as at March 2019). If you buy the larger pack sizes, the price works out to $20 to $42 per week. Store prices can be a few dollars lower or higher per packet.

How well does the nicotine patch work?

People who use the nicotine patch are more likely to quit smoking and stay stopped. When using the patch 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. However, it is slower at easing cravings and may not stop sudden cravings in tempting situations.

After putting on the patch, the level of nicotine in your blood slowly rises and peaks about two to 12 hours later (depending on the patch brand). If you take off a patch and immediately put on a new patch, your nicotine level will remain raised. Over a day, patch users typically absorb up to two-thirds of the dose of nicotine that they would get from smoking a pack of 25 cigarettes per day.
**Which strength of patch should I use?**

If you are using the 24 hour patch, the product information recommends starting on the 21 mg patch.\(^\text{19}\)  

If you are using the 16 hour patch and  
- you smoke less than 15 cigarettes per day, the 15 mg patch is recommended.  
- you smoke 15 or more cigarettes per day, the 25 mg patch is recommended.\(^\text{20}\)  

In some cases, your pharmacist or doctor may recommend that you start on a lower strength patch based on your smoking habits, body weight or state of health.\(^\text{12}\)  

Research shows that the 16 hour patch works as well as the 24 hour patch.\(^\text{9}\) However different people may prefer one type of patch over another, depending on whether they feel better with steady levels of nicotine day and night (24 hour patch), or lower levels of nicotine at night and in the morning (16 hour patch).\(^\text{6}\) Some research suggests that for heavy smokers (20 or more cigarettes per day), the 24 hour patch may improve sleep and better help those who suffer from morning cravings.\(^\text{24}, \text{31}\)

**What do I need to tell my pharmacist or doctor?**

Before buying the patch, 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 the nicotine patch may not be suitable. Please check the Consumer Medicine Information (pack insert) that comes with the patch for the latest list of common medicines and medical conditions that may be affected by using the patch or stopping smoking.  

Illnesses for which you may need medical advice include: heart disease, stroke, any blood circulation disorder, diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, epilepsy or seizures, gastric problems (food pipe and stomach), overactive thyroid gland, phaeochromocytoma (a tumour of the adrenal gland), and allergic reactions that involve swelling of the lips, face and throat or itchy skin rash.\(^\text{19}, \text{20}, \text{32}, \text{33}\)  

The nicotine patch is not recommended for people with long term skin disorders such as psoriasis, dermatitis or urticaria.\(^\text{32}, \text{33}\)
Can I use the patch 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 patch 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 patch is considered safer than smoking, nicotine from the patch is not entirely risk-free for your baby. If you feel you need to use a nicotine replacement therapy product to help you quit, the better options are the nicotine lozenge, inhalator, mouth spray or gum. These products usually provide a lower daily dose of nicotine than the patch. However, if you have nausea or sickness, a patch may be preferred. You may use the day-time patch to help you quit, and you must remove it before going to bed.

If you are breastfeeding, you should not use the patch, however you can use the nicotine lozenge, mouth spray, inhalator, or gum.

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

Using the nicotine patch

Once you’ve bought the patches, it can help to set a quit date. One patch is used per day. When applying the patch, make sure you press it onto a dry, hairless area of skin for about 10 seconds, to make sure it sticks properly. After it’s on, wash and dry your hands to avoid getting nicotine in your eyes and nose. Do not use soap, as this may increase the amount of nicotine absorbed through your hands.

The pack or pack insert will tell you how many weeks to use them. The programs vary between 10 and 16 weeks. If you didn’t get the pack insert or you’ve lost it, ask your pharmacist for it.

Research shows that using the patch for eight weeks works just as well as using them for longer. Highly addicted smokers who still have cravings and withdrawal symptoms eight weeks after quitting may benefit from longer use. There is no evidence that switching down to smaller patches in later weeks is better than simply stopping use after finishing the course of larger patches.

Remember: The nicotine patch 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 lozenge, 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.\textsuperscript{6, 9}

In general, combination therapy is a good option for people who smoke 15 or more cigarettes per day.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 nicotine lozenge, 1.5 mg mini lozenge, mouth spray, 2 mg gum, or inhalator.\textsuperscript{32, 33}

After applying the patch to reduce withdrawal symptoms, another type of nicotine product is used to relieve any cravings.\textsuperscript{6, 21} The product information recommends using at least four lozenges or pieces of gum per day, and no more than 12 pieces per day.\textsuperscript{32, 33} No more than 6 inhalator cartridges or 32 mouth sprays should be used per day.\textsuperscript{33} The pack inserts that comes with the patches or the other products will tell you how long you should use them and how to stop using them.

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.

Using the patch before quitting

If you usually smoke 15 or more cigarettes per day, you may use a patch while reducing your smoking for two weeks before your quit date. Evidence suggests that this method improves your chance of quitting over starting use of a nicotine patch on your quit date.\textsuperscript{9}

You can either use a 21 mg 24 hour patch or the 25 mg 16 hour patch. On your quit date you may then continue to use the patch or combination therapy.\textsuperscript{32, 33}

Smokers who smoke less than 15 cigarettes per day, or have cardiovascular disease, or weigh less than 45 kg, should not use a patch while continuing to smoke.\textsuperscript{19}
Unlike using the inhalator, gum or lozenge when smoking, smokers who use the patch while smoking tend to have increased nicotine blood levels compared to smoking alone. However, evidence suggests that smoking while using the patch is safe for heavier smokers and does not increase serious side effects. Some people have side effects such as feeling dizzy, heart palpitations and nausea but they are mostly mild. Symptoms from too much nicotine (nicotine overdose) are rare, and are described in the Consumer Medicine Information.

Why may I still have cravings while using the patch?

You may still have cravings while using the patch because:

- You may not be using it properly. Read the above section Using the patch and the product information to avoid common problems.

- You may not be getting enough nicotine from the patch. Your options include switching from the 16 hour to the 24 hour patch, or using two different nicotine products at the same time. 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. Using two different nicotine products at the same time may help. (Read Using combination therapy above)

Certain things may trigger cravings, such as:

- places where you normally smoke, such as home, work, or the pub
- people who you usually smoke with, such as family or friends; or being alone
- 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
- 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.
**Side effects of the nicotine patch**

The most common side effect is a rash on the skin where the patch is worn. Moving the patch to a new area of skin each day will help reduce skin irritation, and there are also medicated skin creams available at pharmacies.

Some people have sleep disturbances or vivid dreams, particularly with the high dose 24 hour patch. In these cases, it’s recommended that you either take off the 24 hour patch just before bedtime, or switch to the 16 hour patch.

Less common side effects include headache, nausea and indigestion. Most users rate these reactions as mild. If side effects do not fade within a week or two, 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 patch. 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 the nicotine patch**

Using the nicotine patch is always safer than continuing to smoke. Tobacco smoke contains many cancer-causing substances, carbon monoxide and other dangerous chemicals, which the nicotine patch does not. The patch does not increase your 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 patch 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 the patch?**

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 patch 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 patch 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 patch 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 patch or other nicotine replacement therapy product.\(^{15}\) 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 patch is to ease nicotine withdrawal symptoms while you deal with other aspects of quitting smoking.\(^{6}\)

If you have found the nicotine patch useful in quitting smoking, but have taken up smoking again, you should consider using the patch and/or another nicotine replacement therapy product when you quit again.\(^{1,\,3}\)

**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 listen 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.\(^{45,\,46}\)

**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


