

Maria's story

// I don't really think about my smoking as drug use. It's just something I do. I've been doing it since I was a girl and I'm in my 50s now. Everyone used to do it but I've seen more and more of my friends give it up. I feel like I'm one of the last smokers left! A part of me wants to keep going just to spite everyone telling me to stop, but sometimes I'm just over it and it annoys me that I can't give it up. I've tried a few times but I always seem to go back.

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Contacts



Tobacco

Facts about

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Facts about tobacco

Smoking used to be an integral part of life in Australia. You could smoke at home, in the office, at restaurants, and even the doctor's surgery. But the overwhelming evidence that tobacco harms nearly every organ in your body has started to change public attitudes to smoking. Tobacco use is steadily declining in Australia, but it's still one of the most used drugs.

Tobacco is generally smoked using cigarettes or cigars, or using implements such as dry or water pipes (such as hookah or bong). It is available as chewing tobacco or in snuff, and is also sometimes mixed with cannabis.

The active ingredient in tobacco is nicotine. Nicotine is a stimulant which causes the heart to beat faster and speeds up activity in the central nervous system. Just like other psychoactive substances, nicotine releases 'feel good' chemicals in the brain like dopamine.

Tobacco smoke contains a number of other substances, including tar and carbon monoxide, which are toxic. It's also the number one cause of preventable death and disease in Australia. It can affect the body in a number of different ways:

- Increases blood pressure and heart rate
- Lowers immune system and makes you more susceptible to coughs and colds
- Increases risk of lung diseases and reduces your lung function
- Increases risk of developing a range of different cancers, including lung, stomach, kidney, throat and mouth cancers
- Thickens blood, increasing the risk of blood clots
- Increases chances of having a stroke by 50%
- Increases risk of heart disease and heart attack

Gender-specific harms

Female



- Reduction in fertility and increased difficulty conceiving
- Greatly increased risk of a stroke if over 35 and also taking the contraceptive pill
- Increased risk of developing osteoporosis
- Increased risk of cervical cancer

Male



- Greatly increased risk of impotence from damage to blood vessels
- Damage to sperm and lower sperm count
- Increased risk of penile cancer

Facts about e-cigarettes

In the last decade, an alternative to smoking tobacco called vapourising or e-cigarettes has been developed, and has become increasingly popular. E-cigarettes are battery-powered heating devices that turn concentrated liquid into vapour. E-cigarettes do not always use nicotine, and the liquids come in a wide variety of flavours (as with shisha tobacco for water pipes).

One argument for the use of e-cigarettes is that they allow people to consume nicotine without having to breathe in the harmful components in tobacco smoke. This is a clear benefit but, because e-cigarettes are still relatively new, there is little that is known about the potential long-term health risks associated with their use. The research is ongoing but we won't know for sure for some time.

Because they are new and because the evidence to date is mixed, the legal status of e-cigarettes and related products varies from country to country and state to state. While it is possible to purchase them online from countries where they are legal, it's important to know what laws apply in your state.

Reducing the harms

While the easiest way to reduce harm from tobacco is to not use it, there are many people who are not ready to stop smoking completely, or who may want to give up smoking without giving up nicotine. There are a number of ways in which people can reduce the harms of tobacco use:

Non-tobacco nicotine alternatives

- There are a number of other products you can use that contain nicotine, but not the other harmful substances present in tobacco. These include: patches, gum, lozenges and inhalers. These products can be bought at your local pharmacist, and are generally cheaper for you than carrying on smoking tobacco. They can be used as a replacement for smoking, or as part of your efforts to quit. Have a chat to your doctor about which option may work best for you.

Using e-cigarettes

- Many people use e-cigarettes as a harm reduction strategy, but there are still harms to be considered. As they are still relatively new products, there is little information around the long-term use of e-cigarettes. Some e-cigarette liquids contain highly concentrated nicotine, which, if drunk, can lead to nicotine poisoning. Store it safely if you have young children or pets.

Cut down

- Reducing the amount you smoke will reduce the harm to your health. Try planning other activities at times you would usually be smoking or take less drags and don't inhale as deeply as you normally would.

Take a break

- Even if you decide not to quit smoking right now, giving yourself a period of time in which you will not smoke will give your body a break and also give you a practice run at giving up.