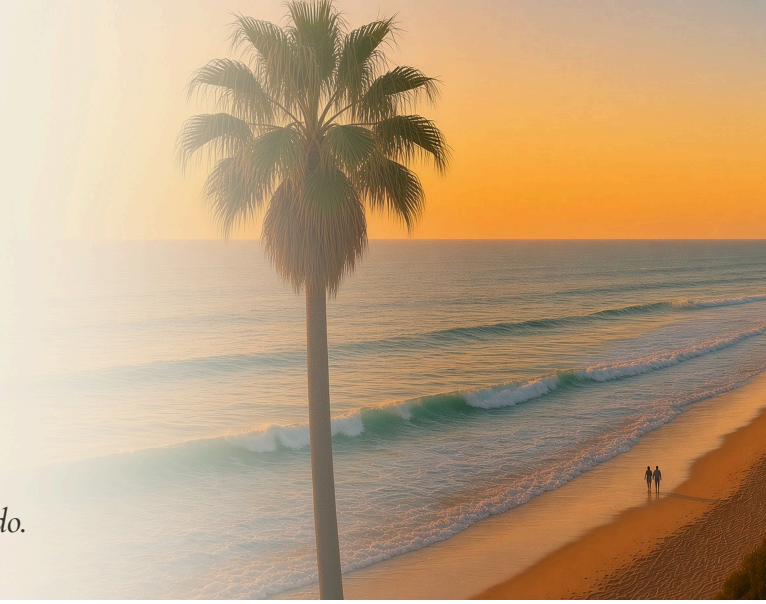
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Quitting Smoking for Your Heart

Quitting is the highest-impact thing anyone with a heart can do. How the medications help, and how to build a plan that holds.

Nearly 3x
the heart attack risk of someone who never smoked

About half
heart disease risk 1 year after quitting, versus people who kept smoking

39%
fewer cardiovascular deaths in people who quit after a heart event

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU QUIT

Recovery starts within minutes

After your last cigarette

20 minutes	12 hours	24 hours	2 to 3 weeks	1 to 9 months	1 year	5 years	10 to 15 years
Heart rate and blood pressure begin falling	Carbon monoxide near normal	Heart attack risk begins to decline	Circulation improves, walking gets easier	Cough and shortness of breath improve	Heart disease risk drops by about half	Stroke risk near never-smoker level for most	Heart disease risk near never-smoker*

Stops are evenly spaced, not drawn to time scale.

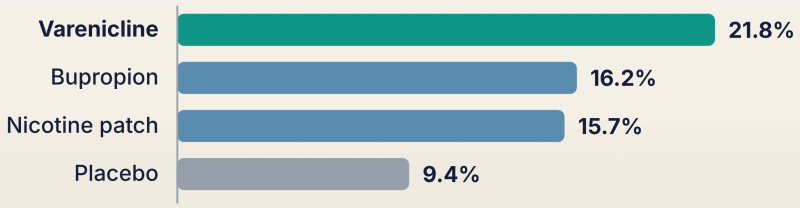
*For light smokers. Heavy smokers with more than 20 pack-years may need 20 to 25 years.

Age changes the size of the benefit but never erases it. Quitting before 40 removes roughly 90 percent of the excess death risk from smoking. Quitting at 45 adds roughly 6 years of life, at 55 roughly 4 and at 65 about 2. One cigarette a day still carries roughly half the heart disease risk of 20 a day.

WHY MEDICATION HELPS

Willpower alone usually loses

Quit and stayed quit, weeks 9 to 24
EAGLES trial, confirmed by testing



Unassisted attempts succeed only about 5 percent of the time. Medication plus behavioral support triples or quadruples one-year success. Varenicline and combination nicotine replacement roughly double quit rates, and either is first-line in stable heart disease.

Call the quitline

1-800-QUIT-NOW is free, anonymous and available in multiple languages. Most US plans, including Medicare and Medicaid, cover quit medications and counseling, though details vary. Many states also offer free nicotine replacement through the quitline.

YOUR QUIT PLAN

The medications, the plan and the first weeks

THE MEDICATIONS

Varenicline (generic)	Eases withdrawal and blunts the pleasure of a relapse cigarette. Start 7 days before quit day. 0.5 mg once daily on days 1 to 3, 0.5 mg twice daily on days 4 to 7, then 1 mg twice daily through week 12. Nausea is the most common side effect and usually settles, and taking it with food helps. The Chantix brand was withdrawn in 2021.
Combination nicotine replacement	A patch for steady background coverage plus gum, a lozenge or nasal spray for breakthrough cravings. It works about as well as varenicline. The patch usually starts on quit day at 21 mg a day for more than 10 cigarettes daily, 14 mg for moderate and 7 mg for light smokers, tapering over 8 to 12 weeks. It is safe in stable heart disease, including after a heart attack.
Bupropion	The backup, a reasonable choice alongside depression. 150 mg once daily for 3 days, then 150 mg twice daily, started 1 to 2 weeks before quit day and continued 7 to 12 weeks. Avoid it with a seizure disorder, an active eating disorder or recent alcohol or sedative withdrawal.
E-cigarettes	They aren't FDA-approved for quitting, and long-term heart safety data are limited. Using them alongside cigarettes carries roughly 36 percent higher cardiovascular risk than smoking alone. Try the FDA-approved treatments first.

BUILD THE PLAN

Pick a date	Within the next 2 weeks, ideally with a low-stress day or two at the start. Fill the prescription early so the medication is in hand.
Clear and tell	Get cigarettes, lighters and ashtrays out of the home, car and office, with no pack kept just in case. Tell family and friends the date.
Plan for triggers	List your triggers, such as morning coffee, meals, driving, stress and drinking, and plan a substitute for each. Limit alcohol, the most common relapse trigger.
Book follow-up	See your doctor at 1 to 2 weeks, then at 1, 3 and 6 months. Take the medication for the full course, typically 12 weeks.

THE FIRST WEEKS

Days 1 to 7	The worst stretch, when withdrawal peaks and cravings come hard. Use your short-acting nicotine replacement, walk and drink water.
Weeks 2 to 4	Physical symptoms fade, but triggered cravings can still be intense. Watch for the single cigarette taken to defuse stress, which usually turns into a full relapse.
If you slip	One cigarette doesn't have to mean full relapse. Find the trigger, adjust the plan, get back on the medication and call your support person or the quitline.
Weight	Most people gain 7 to 13 pounds in the first year. In a large study, quitters who gained 5 to 10 kg had a 75 percent lower risk of cardiovascular death than people who kept smoking.

WHEN A CRAVING HITS

Most cravings last 3 to 5 minutes and pass on their own. Try the 4 D's. Delay by telling yourself five more minutes, distract yourself with your hands or a change of room, drink water and deep breathe.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE

damianrasch.com/smoking-cessation

For education only, and not a substitute for advice from your own physician. Sources include the 2014 US Surgeon General's report, the 2022 and 2023 Cochrane reviews, the EAGLES (Lancet 2016) and EVITA (Circulation 2016) trials, the 2018 ACC tobacco cessation pathway and Hu and colleagues (NEJM 2018).

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