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Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT)

Products to help you quit smoking and vaping



Speak to a NSW Quitline counsellor to quit smoking or vaping

 **Quitline 13 7848**

How to use Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT)

Publisher

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Information for people who smoke or vape

Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) can make a big difference in helping you quit. In the first few weeks of trying to quit, many people get strong withdrawal symptoms and cravings. NRT helps reduce these symptoms, making the quitting process easier. To get the best results, it's important to:

- choose the right NRT products for you
- know how to use them correctly.

Did you know?

Using NRT improves your chances of successfully quitting by 50–60%



This guide will improve your knowledge about:

- nicotine dependence and withdrawal
- NRT and how it can help
- myths about NRT
- possible side effects of NRT
- how to use different types of NRT, including addressing common issues
- NRT use in specific situations
- where to get more information.

Understanding nicotine dependence and withdrawal

Nicotine dependence

Nicotine is the addictive component of tobacco and vaping products. When you smoke or vape, you inhale nicotine. This unlocks a 'feel good' chemical in the brain called dopamine, giving you a little 'hit' or 'buzz'. This feeling doesn't last long, which is what makes you want to smoke or vape again. The more you smoke or vape, the more nicotine you need to feel good. This is known as nicotine dependence.

Nicotine withdrawal

If you have nicotine dependence and try to quit, you will get withdrawal symptoms, such as:

- nicotine cravings (wanting to smoke or vape to get a nicotine 'buzz')
- other symptoms like feeling anxious or irritable, headaches, trouble concentrating, feeling more hungry than usual, and difficulty sleeping.

The good news is that nicotine withdrawal symptoms:

- are strongest in the first week (for some people only in the first 2–3 days)
- usually settle down and can disappear after 2–4 weeks
- can be reduced through the use of NRT making the quitting process easier.

Understanding NRT

What is NRT?

NRT works by releasing small amounts of nicotine into the body. It does this at a slower rate than smoking or vaping and without all the harmful chemicals.

This makes it less addictive and safer to use. NRT comes in different forms:

- patches, which release nicotine slowly through the skin, giving you a steady dose
- oral NRT (gum, lozenges, spray), which release nicotine more quickly, helping you deal with sudden cravings.

Reasons to use NRT

- It can increase your chances of quitting successfully by 50–60%.
- Combining NRT patches and oral NRT (gum, lozenges or spray) increases your chance of success even more.
- It is safe, effective and approved for use in Australia.
- It is designed to reduce withdrawal symptoms and cravings.
- It can be cheaper than smoking.
- NRT patches are available by prescription through your doctor at a reduced price.

 Under the Closing the Gap Scheme, eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can access nicotine patches for free or for a small co-payment.



Myths about NRT

Myth	Truth
NRT is as addictive as smoking or vaping	Using NRT to manage cravings or withdrawal symptoms delivers nicotine more slowly and at lower levels than smoking or vaping. As a result, the risk of becoming addicted to NRT is very small.
NRT is as harmful as smoking or vaping	There are over 7,000 chemicals in tobacco smoke and hundreds of chemicals in vaping products, and many of these are harmful. Using NRT is low risk and is always less harmful than continuing to smoke or vape.
NRT should stop my cravings completely	NRT is not designed to completely replace the nicotine or stop cravings completely. Eventually the cravings will stop when the body is no longer dependent on nicotine.
I can't use more than one NRT product at a time	NRT products can be used alone or in combination (e.g. patch plus oral NRT). Combination NRT gives better relief of cravings and nicotine withdrawal symptoms and increases the chance of quitting successfully.
Smoking or vaping while using NRT is dangerous	It is generally safe to use NRT while cutting down your smoking or vaping if you are not ready to stop suddenly. Try not to continue this for a long time. If you are finding it difficult to cut down while using nicotine replacement therapy, talk to a health professional or Quitline about other ways to help you quit.
NRT is too expensive	Over time the cost of NRT is less expensive than continuing to smoke or vape, as NRT is used for a limited time. NRT patches are available by prescription at a discounted price while combined with counselling such as Quitline.  Under the Closing the Gap Scheme, eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can access nicotine patches for free or for a small co-payment.
NRT doesn't work	Using one type of NRT increases success of quitting by 50–60%. Using more than one form of NRT increases the success rate further, with no increased safety risk.

How to use NRT

Talk to your health worker, doctor or pharmacist about which form of NRT is best for you. For your best chance of success, use NRT combined with support services such as Quitline. NRT helps to reduce your withdrawal symptoms and cravings to smoke or vape, while Quitline will help you to identify your other triggers to smoke or vape.



Nicotine patches

Nicotine from patches is absorbed through your skin at a relatively steady rate. Patches are available in different strengths and can be used over a 16-hour or 24-hour period.

- The 24-hour patch is available in 21 mg, 14 mg and 7 mg strengths.
- The 16-hour patch is available in 25 mg, 15 mg and 10 mg strengths.

Patches can be used to help you cut down and get ready to quit. You can start using patches several weeks before you stop smoking or vaping to help you prepare for quitting.

NRT patches are available by prescription at reduced cost through your doctor.

- Use the patch daily for 8–12 weeks.
- Put the patch on clean, dry and hair-free skin on the upper arm, chest or back.
- Press down to ensure the patch sticks to your skin.
- Avoid putting the patch on skin that is irritated, oily, scarred or damaged.
- Put the patch on a different part of your body each day to avoid your skin getting irritated.

If you still get urges to smoke or vape:

- use an oral nicotine replacement product as well
- talk to your doctor or pharmacist if your urges are strong. They may suggest using a second patch.

Common issues with NRT patches

What's not working?	How to fix it
Vivid or unsettling dreams	Place the patch on just before you sleep, so the patch starts working as you're due to wake up, and not during the night. If sleep disturbances continue, consider using a 16-hour patch placed first thing in the morning and remove it before going to bed.
Getting mild cravings	Add oral NRT.
Getting strong cravings	Talk to your pharmacist or doctor about whether you are using the patch correctly or need higher doses.
Patch won't stick	- Don't get the patch wet – shower first, and dry off completely before putting it onto clean, dry skin. - Don't use moisturiser on the patch site. - Stick the patch down with tape that won't irritate the skin, available at a pharmacy.
Patch makes my skin itchy	- Change where you put the patch on your body each day to avoid skin irritation. - Changing the brand of the patch might also help. - If skin irritation persists, a medicated cream (hydrocortisone 1% cream) may help manage the skin irritation.
Severe skin reaction	Stop using patches and talk to your doctor about other non-nicotine medications or oral NRT instead.
Nerve pain	- This is an uncommon side effect. If this happens, change the patch location or reduce the strength of the patch. - If symptoms persist, take the patch off and speak to a health professional.

Oral nicotine replacement therapy

Oral NRT products are fast acting and absorbed through the lining of the mouth. It is best to use them when you first notice a craving, and not let the craving build.



Note: With any oral NRT product, avoid eating and drinking for 15 minutes before using the product and while using it. If you are breastfeeding, feed your baby first before using oral NRT.



Nicotine gum

Nicotine gum isn't chewed like regular gum. Too much chewing can stop the gum from working properly and cause irritation to your throat and stomach.

- Put a piece of gum in your mouth, chew until you feel a tingling sensation or a peppery taste, then place (park) it between the cheek and gum.
- When the tingle is gone, begin chewing again, until the tingle returns then park the gum again. You may want to swap it to the other side of your mouth.
- Repeat the chew-park action until you feel no more tingling or peppery taste.
- Nicotine gum starts working within a few minutes. Use the gum for about 30 minutes, then throw it in the bin.
- Do not use more than 24 pieces per day.



Note: Nicotine gum is not suitable for people with dentures. If you wear dentures nicotine lozenges may be a better option for you.



Nicotine lozenges

- Put a lozenge in your mouth and move it around your mouth to start releasing nicotine, then park it between the cheek and the gum or under the tongue.
- From time to time, move the lozenge to the other side of your mouth.
- Don't chew or swallow it—let it dissolve.
- Nicotine lozenges start working within a few minutes.
- Use one lozenge at a time.
- Do not use more than 15 lozenges per day.



Mouth spray

Mouth spray is the fastest acting oral NRT product. It starts working within a minute after using.

If the spray is new or has not been used for a few hours, to ensure the correct dose:

- Shake the container.
- Point it away from yourself and others, and press the top of the dispenser several times until a fine mist appears.
- If the liquid in the container comes out as a stream, repeat these steps until it mists.
- Point the mouth spray inside your cheek or under the tongue and press lightly. You may feel some tingling in your mouth.
- One spray is about 1 mg of nicotine per dose.
- Don't spray directly into the throat and avoid breathing in while spraying.



Note:

1 spray = 1 mg nicotine.



Common issues with oral NRT

What's not working?	How to fix it
Still getting cravings	• Check that you are using the product correctly. • Increase the dose of the oral NRT or add a patch. • Talk to Quitline if cravings are strong, frequent or don't settle down.
Don't like the taste	• Use a flavoured product, switch to a different flavour or try another type of oral NRT.
Hiccups or indigestion	• Don't continually chew the gum. • Rest the gum or lozenge against your cheek or under your tongue. • Don't breathe in when using the mouth spray.
Cough/throat irritation	• If using the mouth spray, don't breathe in as you spray and point the spray inside your cheek or under the tongue.
Tingling lips with mouth spray	• Avoid getting any spray on your lips.
You have dentures	• Use nicotine lozenges or mouth spray instead of gum.



General tips

- Stronger forms of gum, lozenges (4 mg) and patches (21 mg/24-hour patch and 25 mg/16-hour patch) may work better for people who need more nicotine or for those who still feel cravings when using the weaker forms.
- Oral NRT can be used alongside NRT patches. The combination increases the chance of quitting successfully.
- If you continue to have strong cravings, speak to your pharmacist or doctor about adjusting the amount or strength of NRT and to ensure you are using the products correctly.
- As with all medicines, keep NRT products out of reach of children.



Possible side effects

- heart palpitations/chest pain (all products)

Patches

- skin irritation or itching
- sleep disturbances and vivid dreams
- neuralgia or nerve pain (an uncommon side effect)

Oral products

- nausea or vomiting
- gastrointestinal problems
- mouth and throat soreness, mouth ulcers
- hiccups, or coughing.

Note: Most side effects are mild and improve with correct use or by changing the type or dose of NRT.

NRT use during pregnancy

NRT is safer than continuing to smoke or vape during pregnancy. If you are finding it hard to quit using behavioural strategies alone, NRT may help. It should be used under the care of your GP, midwife or other health professional.

Oral NRT products (such as gum or lozenges) are recommended instead of patches. If you use nicotine patches, remove them before going to bed at night.

Quitline counselling and support can also help people who are pregnant to quit smoking or vaping.

NRT use in breastfeeding

Using NRT while breastfeeding is much safer than continuing to smoke or vape. Oral NRT products are recommended rather than patches. It's best to use NRT after feeding your baby, not before.

NRT use in children and adolescents

Although NRT is safe for people 12–17 years old, it has not yet been proven to improve quit rates in this group. It is recommended that NRT only be used in conjunction with a counselling program such as Quitline. Anyone aged 12–17 years should speak to their doctor before using NRT. NRT is not recommended for children under 12 years old.

NRT use in people with heart disease

Is safe for most people if heart disease is managed well. If you have recently had a heart attack, serious heart problems, or have been in hospital because of a heart condition, talk to your doctor before using NRT.

Disclaimer

Please note that this information leaflet is a guide only and is not intended to replace the consumer medicine information and health professional advice.

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Speak with a Quitline counsellor for support to quit smoking or vaping — Aboriginal counsellors are available

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