

Medicines to treat nicotine dependence.

Key facts

- If you are dependent (addicted) to nicotine and want to quit smoking, there are medicines that can help.
- Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) is available over the counter. It helps to reduce nicotine cravings and withdrawal symptoms that can happen when you stop smoking.
- Prescription medicines can help make it easier for you to stop smoking.
- Most people can benefit from NRT or medicines to treat nicotine dependence, but it's important to get medical advice before taking any medicines.
- Your doctor or pharmacist can assess you and advise the best strategy to stop smoking.

What is nicotine dependence?

Nicotine is the addictive chemical found in tobacco.

If you find it difficult to cut down or stop using products containing tobacco such as cigarettes, you may have nicotine dependence (also known as addiction).

Here are some signs that you may be nicotine dependent:

You smoke within 30 minutes of waking up.

You smoke 10 or more cigarettes each day.

You have cravings and withdrawal symptoms if you try to cut down or quit.

Understanding how dependent you are on nicotine can help you choose the most effective strategy to quit.

How does nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) work?

Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) works by releasing nicotine into your bloodstream to minimize or avoid cigarette cravings.

NRT is considered a 'first-line' medicine for treating nicotine dependence. This means that it's a good first option if you want to take medicines to help you quit smoking. If used correctly, NRT can increase your chance of successfully quitting smoking.

NRT comes in many forms, including:

patches (to stick on your skin)

chewing gum

lozenges

mouth sprays

inhalers

Many people use different types of NRT. For example, you might use a daily nicotine patch with a nicotine inhaler or gum. Using different types of NRT is often more effective than using one.

Using NRT to quit smoking is less harmful than smoking, so it's worth considering if you are trying to quit. Most people can safely use NRT, but it's a good idea to check with your doctor or pharmacist before you start.

NRT is available over the counter at pharmacies. You do not need a prescription. Nicotine patches are also available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) with a doctor's prescription.

The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) lets Australians get necessary prescribed medicines without paying full price.

Dr Raza Abbas

What types of prescription medicines treat nicotine dependence?

In Australia, there are 2 types of prescription medicines to treat nicotine dependence:

Varenicline

Bupropion

Both medicines are taken as oral tablets. ***You can only buy them from a pharmacy with a doctor's prescription.*** They are not usually taken at the same time.

Varenicline is considered a 'first-line' medicine for treating nicotine dependence. Bupropion is also effective at helping people quit smoking but is considered less effective than varenicline and just as effective as NRT.

How does varenicline help with nicotine dependence?

Varenicline helps by making smoking less enjoyable. It works by attaching to certain pleasure receptors in your brain. If those receptors are occupied, nicotine can't bind to those same receptors when you smoke, so it doesn't feel as good. This can lead to you feeling fewer withdrawal symptoms and cravings.

Varenicline is generally recommended for people who smoke at least 10 cigarettes each day. Your doctor can give you more advice about whether varenicline is right for you.

How does bupropion help with nicotine dependence?

Bupropion is an antidepressant medicine that can help people quit smoking. It is not clear how bupropion helps with nicotine dependence. It is thought to act on certain chemicals in the brain to reduce cravings.

How do I take varenicline and bupropion?

-Your doctor will advise which medicine is most suitable for you. They are not usually taken at the same time.

-It can take a few days for the medicine to start working so it's usually recommended to start taking them 1 or 2 weeks before you stop smoking. However, your doctor or pharmacist should advise you on when to start taking them.

-Varenicline is taken daily for about 12 weeks. Bupropion is usually taken for at least 7 weeks. Your doctor will review you regularly and monitor your progress.

-Most people tolerate both medicines well, but some people have side effects. If you have side effects after starting a new medicine, discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist.

-Neither medicine will make you quit smoking alone, but along with a quit plan, support from your doctor and quit smoking services, they can increase your chance of successfully quitting smoking. Depending on your situation, your doctor may recommend that you take a medicine with NRT to increase your chance of quitting smoking successfully.

Can e-cigarettes ('vaping') help with nicotine dependence?

E-cigarettes aren't recommended if you are trying to quit smoking.

This is mostly because there is no strong evidence that e-cigarettes are safe and effective. However, they may be suitable for some people, especially those who want to quit smoking but haven't succeeded with other methods, including medicines.

If you want to use e-cigarettes as part of your quit plan, speak to your doctor. **Vapes containing nicotine are only legal in Australia if you have a prescription from a doctor.**