

Smoking in Canada

Help plan members break free

He's been smoking for more than twenty years. Each day, within half an hour of rising from bed, he lights up his first cigarette. Over the course of the day he'll consume another 15 or so, and at the present time, he's not taking any steps to quit. Oh yes, there's an excellent chance that he's a member of your group benefits plan.

It's true the average Canadian smoker is well established in the habit, and currently not making any serious effort to quit, but there is room for optimism. The annual Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey gives legislators, health care professionals and sponsors of group benefits plans reason to believe efforts to reduce the prevalence of smoking in Canada are working.

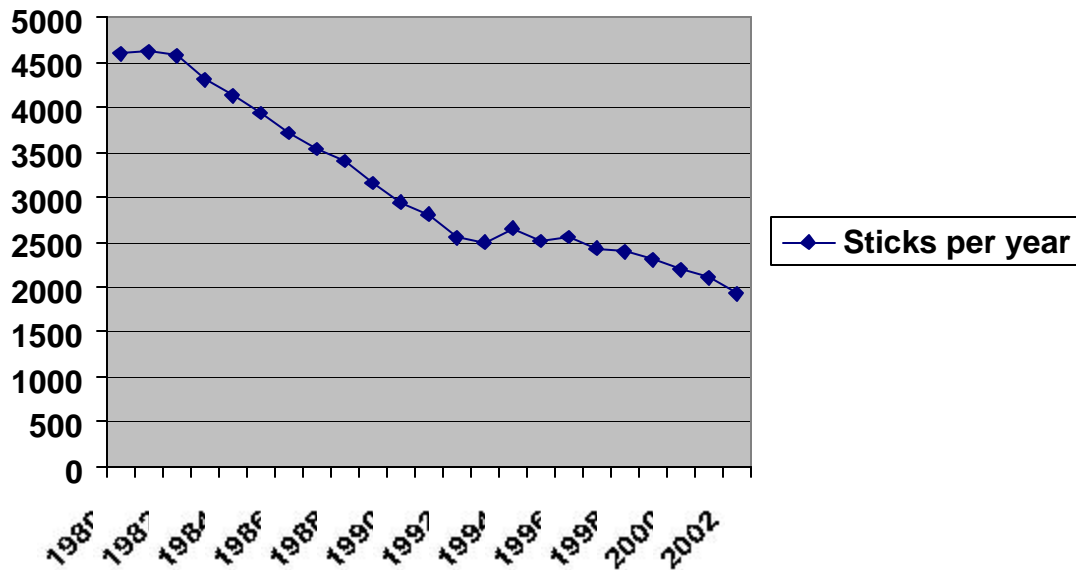
Fewer smokers taking fewer breaks

The Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey (CTUMS) for 2001 shows the number of smokers is gradually decreasing. The survey found 22 percent of the population aged 15 years and older—a total of 5.4 million Canadians—identify themselves as smokers (24 percent are former smokers and 54 percent have never smoked at all). This compares to 24 percent in 2000, and 25 percent in 1999. Furthermore, this decrease in the total number of people smoking is matched by a decrease in the number of cigarettes (or equivalent products) being consumed per person.

The production and sale of tobacco products in Canada are monitored by Statistics Canada. Comparing the first ten months of 2002 to the same period in 2001, tobacco sales fell from 39.9 billion cigarettes to 37 billion. This represents a decrease of more than 8 percent in year-to-year per capita tobacco consumption and a 17 percent reduction since 1999, bringing smoking to its lowest level in 50 years.

Comparing smoker to smoker, the CTUMS found men still smoke more than women. Men consume an average of 17.1 cigarettes per day, while females smoke an average of 15 each day. By age group, men 55 years and over consume the largest number of cigarettes per day (19.9), followed by men in the 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 age groups (18 per day) and women 35 to 44 (17.8 per day).

Per capita consumption of cigarettes and equivalents (such as roll-your-own cigarettes) by Canadians age 15 and over from 1980 to 2002.



The declining numbers are very encouraging, but with more than one in five Canadians still in the habit of lighting up, there's plenty of work to be done to help smokers kick the habit. Smoking continues to be the leading cause of preventable death in Canada and smoking-related disease and illness take the lives of 45,000 Canadians each year. Consider that smoking kills five times the number of people that die each year as a result of car accidents, murder, suicide and alcohol abuse **combined**.

Who's quitting, and who's not?

The youngest plan members (under 24 years of age) are the people most at risk for taking up smoking. Eighty-five percent of smokers start the habit before the age of 18 and studies indicate that the earlier a smoker starts, the more difficult it is for a smoker to quit.

Regardless of age, the factors that motivate smokers to break the nicotine addiction are the same. The reason most often given is concern for the effects that smoking will have on a smoker's own personal health in the future, followed by concerns for his or her present health. It's significant that the health of another family member (including a new or unborn baby) is a reason given "relatively rarely" (only 7 percent of the time). This may indicate the dangers of second-hand smoke are not yet widely understood or appreciated.

Breaking free is hard to do

It takes an average of 3.4 attempts before smokers are able to successfully break the habit. But when those who are able to quit after just one attempt are removed from the equation, the average increases to 6.1 attempts. So it's significant for would-be quitters to make a good, solid first effort. Of those who did quit, 59 percent used no formal assistance to quit, leaving us to wonder: if we can encourage greater use of organized smoking cessation programs, can the number of attempts required be reduced?

Anne Marie Ramsay thinks so. Ms. Ramsay is a Public Health Nurse and coordinator of a smoking cessation program for parents and parents-to-be who are between the ages of 14 and 24. The program, an initiative of the Region of Waterloo Public Health, is called "Kick Butt for Two" and takes the form of a six-week support group. Ramsay says, "Any kind of positive social support will help a smoker in his or her effort to quit. Things like a smoke-free home, a smoke-free work environment, smoke-free restaurants and bars, a quit-buddy and a support group will offer the different levels of encouragement that the quitter needs." Ramsay adds that smokers need to know what to look for in a support person, "It doesn't have to be a non-smoker, but it does need to be someone supportive, who will respect the efforts you're making and be a positive influence in your attempt to quit."

Many smokers say having more personal willpower would help them break the habit, but that's not something that can be bought at the local grocer. Fortunately, there are plenty of other forms of assistance available. Doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, psychologists and counsellors can all offer advice and guidance.

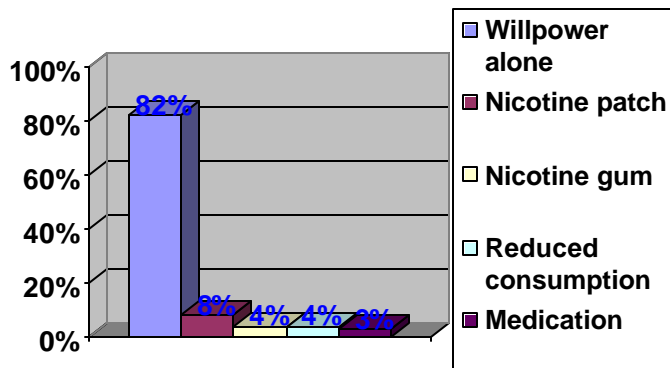
Retired nurse and former smoker Caroline Parks is an expert on the subject of smoking cessation. Through her firm, Hope Consulting, and as a volunteer with a community-based support group called Smoker's Anonymous, Ms. Parks uses positive motivation to help smokers quit. Parks says, "Only a smoker can understand the mind of a smoker. You have to help them change the way they think and take away the sense of powerlessness that they have about their addiction." Her strategy is to get smokers enthused about the possibility of a tobacco-free life, rather than terrified about what will happen if they don't quit. Parks believes any investment plan sponsors make to help their employees quit will be returned many times over, "One employee who is

successful will influence and encourage another who never believed he or she could do it. It has a domino effect.” Parks says, “Employers have to be visionary and look at the benefits to be achieved down the road in terms of productivity and health care costs. And don’t forget, you’re saving a life.”

Callers to the Canadian Cancer Society (1-888-939-3333) can request up to five free copies of *One Step At A Time*, a series of booklets written for smokers at each stage in the quitting process. Titles include *For smokers who don’t want to quit*, *For smokers who want to quit* and *If you want to help a smoker quit*.

To quit smoking, a person needs to break both her chemical addiction to nicotine, and her psychological dependency on the activities that accompany smoking. Along with a program and support group, nicotine replacement products may have a role to play. These products control the body’s craving for nicotine while the smoker changes his or her personal habits and routines. Some nicotine replacements (such as patches and gum) are available over-the-counter from a pharmacist, while others need a prescription from a doctor.

How did you quit?



Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

When the going gets tough, call the Helpline.

The Smokers’ Helpline understands what a person who’s trying to quit smoking goes through. This Canadian Cancer Society program provides information, advice, encouragement and support to help a smoker resist the temptation. There’s also information tailored for the family, friends and employers of smokers who want to quit.

For free, confidential advice from a trained Quit Specialist, call the Smokers' Helpline:
Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario 1-877-513-5333
Quebec 1-888-853-6666
British Columbia 1-877-455-2233

For most people, it's difficult to quit smoking and there are bound to be setbacks. But every attempt to quit brings your plan member one step closer to his goal. Plan sponsors can help by providing a smoke-free work environment that encourages individuals in their attempts, and severely restricts or completely eliminates smoking on-site. Smokers admit that it's easier to quit when it's harder to smoke. You might consider inviting a local organization to conduct on-site seminars, or start a lunch hour support group. Plan members spend a lot of time at work, so they need just as much support from their employers as they need from their families as they struggle to break their tobacco dependency. As Caroline Parks is fond of telling her support group members, "United we stand, divided we smoke."

He quit. She quit. eQuit.

It's not news that people are often unsuccessful in their first attempt to quit smoking. In fact, it's not unusual for a smoker to make numerous attempts before they are able to give up the habit for good. With that in mind, it's important for smokers to receive all the support they can get, both at home and on-the-job, when trying to break their dependency on tobacco.

One novel support network now available to smokers is Health Canada's eQuit Web site at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/tobacco/quitting/e-quit/index.html>. eQuit is an electronic message service designed to encourage and support a smoker through the difficult first days of smoke-free living.

Once registered, aspiring non-smokers begin receiving daily e-mail reminders guiding them to their first milestone, an official quitting date scheduled 11 days from enrolment. The messages continue for another 19 days, keeping the participant on-track to achieve his or her goal. Of course, the Web site also contains information and research that make the case for a tobacco-free life, as well as links and contact information for additional smoking cessation resources, support groups and counselling services across Canada.

For a more visually compelling eQuit experience, smokers can visit “You and Me, Smokefree” at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/tobacco/youth/index.html. Designed with youth in mind, the site contains slick interactive tools that illustrate, for instance, the personal financial cost of smoking. The site contains a link to Quit4Life, an interactive area where visitors can follow the story of four different young people faced with the challenge of kicking the habit.

Obviously, e-mail messages aren’t intended to replace a medical professional, and Web sites can’t supply the discipline or desire necessary to break the habit or beat the addiction, but they can provide a valuable source of information and support to those who are determined to break free from tobacco.

Sources: Health Canada; The Third National Conference on Tobacco or Health; Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey; The National Population Health Survey (1994/1995); The College of Family Physicians of Canada; Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, catalogue number 11-001-XIE, (November 27, 2002).