

Managing Cravings



Cravings are normal and to be expected. They are usually stronger early in treatment, although more limited cravings may persist for several weeks after stopping

smoking. The urge to smoke can be triggered by things in the environment that remind you of smoking, such as seeing other people smoking, contact with people, certain times of the day, places and situations you normally associate with smoking.

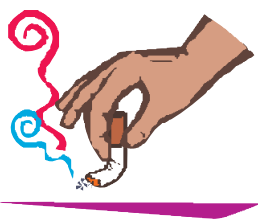
Particular types of emotions may also trigger the desire for a cigarette (e.g. anger, stress, happiness). Physical signs may include tightness in your stomach and a feeling of nervousness. Psychological signs may include feeling you 'need' a cigarette, increased thoughts of how good you would feel from a cigarette, remembering times you smoked in the past or planning how you would go about getting a cigarette.

Cravings and urges usually last only a few minutes and at most a couple of hours. Typically, they peak after a few minutes and then die down, like a wave. Cravings will become less frequent and less intense as you learn to cope with them. One way to deal with cravings is to try and avoid them in the first place by, for example, reducing your exposure to craving triggers. Sometimes cravings can't be avoided therefore it is necessary to find a way to cope with them, such as:

- **Getting involved in some distracting activity** - reading, going to a movie, taking a walk, meeting a friend.

- **Talking it through** - talk to friends or family about craving when it occurs. It can help to pinpoint the source of the craving and to relieve the feeling. Identifying the trigger for the craving may assist with avoiding it in the future.

- **Urge surfing** - Some urges are too strong to ignore. If this happens you can choose to stay with the urge until it passes. Like waves, urges start small, grow to a peak, and then subside. The idea of urge surfing is similar to that used in judo, where one overpowers an opponent by first going with the force of the attack and then taking control of it and redirecting it to your own advantage. There are three basic steps:



- Take an inventory of how you experience the craving. Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands in a comfortable position. Take a few deep breaths and focus your attention inward. Allow your attention to wander through your body. Notice where in your body you

experience the craving and what the sensations are like. Notice each area where you experience the craving and tell yourself what you are experiencing.

- Focus on one area where you are experiencing the urge. Notice the sensations in that area, for example, heat, cold, tingling, numbness. Are your muscles tense or relaxed? Notice the sensations and describe them to yourself, e.g. "... my mouth feels dry and parched, there's tension in my neck. I keep swallowing. As I exhale, I can imagine the smell and taste of a cigarette."

- Repeat the focus on each part of your body that experiences the craving. Notice how the urge comes and goes. Many people notice that after a few minutes the craving has vanished. The purpose of this exercise, however, is not to make the craving go away but to experience the craving in a new way. If you practice, you will become familiar with your cravings and learn how to ride them out until they go away naturally.

- **Challenge and change your thoughts** -

When experiencing a craving, many people tend to remember only the good things about smoking. Some people find it helpful to remind themselves of the benefits of not smoking and the negative consequences of smoking.

- **Self-Talk** - What you tell yourself about your cravings will affect how you experience and handle them. Your thinking (or self-talk) can be used to strengthen or weaken your urges. Hidden or automatic self-talk about urges can make them harder to handle.

For example: "I won't be able to stand this, it's going to get stronger and stronger until I blow up or smoke".

Other types of self statements can make the urge to smoke easier to handle.

"This craving is uncomfortable but in 15 minutes or so I'll be feeling okay again. I can handle that".

There are two steps in using self-talk constructively:

- Pinpoint what you tell yourself about an urge that makes it harder to cope with it. One way to tell if you are on the right track is when you hit upon a self-statement that increases your discomfort.
- Use self-talk to challenge that statement.

The more you can successfully cope with a craving, the less frequent and less intense the cravings will become. It is a matter of practice.

Listed below are ideas to use as a challenge to your thinking that you may find useful:

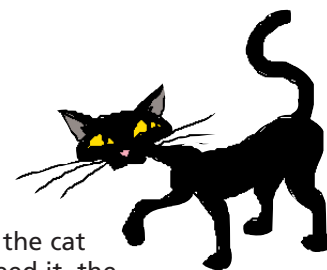
What is the evidence? That if you don't have a cigarette in the next 10 minutes you won't cope or something bad will happen? That people who are recovering from heavy smoking don't experience the feelings that you have? There is something the matter with you and you will never improve?

What is so awful about that? What's so awful about feeling uncomfortable? Of course you can survive it. What's so terrible about experiencing an urge? If you hang in there you'll be fine. These urges are not like being hungry or thirsty – they are more like a craving for a type of food – they pass, in time.

Maybe you worry about being irritable, preoccupied or hard to get along with while you're experiencing cravings. What's so bad about that? In a complicated situation, there is no perfect way of getting through.

Dealing with Cravings

- Identify when the craving starts – knowing what is going on is the first step in doing something about it.
- Have distractions already in mind to do when a craving strikes.
- Remind yourself that cravings are a normal part of cutting down and that they will pass with time – the more you give into cravings the stronger they become.



- Remember that cravings are like a stray cat – the more you feed it the more the cat comes back. If you don't feed it, the cat eventually stops coming back. If you feed it occasionally it will still hang around hoping to get fed. If there is the occasional cigarette the addiction and the cravings will remain.
- Try to find something to distract yourself with – even if you only delay smoking. Short, time limited activities that can be picked up and then put down are the best.
- Try to work out when you are more likely to crave a cigarette – eg; in certain situations, with particular people, when you have an alcoholic drink, when you feel a certain way – and plan ahead how you will deal with each situation when it comes up.
- Delay smoking for an hour, or even five minutes. When the time is up, delay smoking for another hour, and then another, and so on. It is easier to resist cravings for a manageable period of time than to try to stop "forever". A day at a time.
- Talk to someone supportive when you start to get cravings.
- Do something relaxing and enjoyable instead.

- Have a bath or shower.
- Have a massage.
- Go for a walk or run, or do other physical exercise.
- Visit friends who don't smoke or won't while you are there.
- Watch a video or go to the movies.
- Listen to relaxation tapes.



- Reward your efforts to cut down, even if you ended up smoking more than you meant to – it takes time to make change and being hard on yourself will make it more difficult to change your habits.
- Talk to friends who have been able to cut down their use and find out what worked for them.
- Talk to friends about how they enjoy themselves or relax to get some more ideas.