



Quit Smoking for Good: *Role of Pharmacy*

Written by Edward Murphy - Project Manager, HSE Tobacco Free Ireland Programme

In Ireland, smoking is the leading cause of avoidable death. Nearly 6,000 people die in Ireland each year from the effects of smoking and thousands more live with disabilities and ill-health as a result of their smoking. Currently in Ireland, 17% of adults smoke. While we have made significant inroads in reducing smoking prevalence in the general population, there is a health inequality gap emerging with smoking prevalence still at 21% in the most deprived areas versus 9% in the most affluent areas. Current government target is for Ireland to be tobacco-free with a smoking prevalence <5% by 2025.

In recent times, research shows that smoking is also a risk factor for coronavirus infection. Studies also show that smoking increases your risk of acute respiratory infections like flu. Just like flu, a coronavirus infection may be more severe in people who smoke.

According to Dr Paul Kavanagh, Specialist in Public Health Medicine, HSE, says, *"Smoking increases your risk of acute respiratory infections like COVID-19 in a number of ways.*

Cigarette smoke damages the natural barriers in your airways and lungs to infections, dampens down your immunity and affects your breathing and circulation in a way that makes you vulnerable to severe illness and complications of infection. There is always good reason for people who smoke to quit, but there is no doubt that COVID-19 means this is now more important than ever."

Smoking is an addictive behaviour which is hard to change. However, the good news is that Ireland now has more quitters than smokers. We know that the majority of smokers want to quit, however, many choose to quit without help or support, and are therefore less likely to quit. The HSE current Quit campaign, 'The Last Stop' focuses on helping people believe they can quit for good if they get the support they need. Its message is Stop smoking for 28 days and you are 5 times more likely to quit for good. This tactic breaks down the challenge of quitting smoking into an achievable goal – 28 days and 'quit months' at key times of the year create the focused opportunity to quit. The

most recent quit month was October 2021 and another quit month is planned again for January 2022. Quit months are supported by a large scale advertising and media campaign across TV, radio, digital and social encouraging smokers in Ireland to come together to make this stop their last stop and to take up the offer of our help.

Evidence-based Supports

The HSE Tobacco Free Ireland Programme has recently developed Ireland's first *National Stop Smoking Clinical Guidelines* - these guidelines will be published by the Department of Health in early 2021. They set-out evidence-based recommendations for the identification and treatment of smoking in routine clinical care by healthcare professionals, with specific recommendations for pregnant women and those in secondary mental health settings. The Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland was represented on the Clinical Guideline Development Group throughout the guideline formulation process.

The HSE Quit programme provides a range of evidence-based supports to help people quit smoking. These supports are available through the Freephone QuitLine (1800 201 203), via live chat and an active social media community and through face-to-face behavioural support with our local stop smoking advisors. Evidence suggests that those who engage with professional behavioural supports double their chances of quitting smoking compared to quitting with no help or support.

Evidence also tells us that those who choose to use Stop Smoking Medications and Nicotine Replacement Therapies (NRT) in their quit attempt *double their chances of quitting smoking* further; therefore, if a smoker engages with behavioural support and uses stop smoking medications or NRT and manages to stay quit for 28 days they are five times more likely to stay quit.

How can pharmacists help?

Healthcare professionals, particularly pharmacists, have a unique expertise and opportunity to promote correct and sustained use of stop smoking medication and refer to local stop smoking advisors (see www.quit.ie) for behavioural support. Trained stop smoking advisors can assess a client's nicotine dependence and advise on which options suit best as well as working with the client over a 12 month period to support the behavioural elements of smoking cessation, examining in detail the clients psychological and emotional dependence and working with them to overcome this.

Varenicline (Champix) in combination with a short acting nicotine replacement product is the first line of treatment for those who are suitable for same. Otherwise combination nicotine replacement therapy products (a slow release product such as the patch in

combination with a fast acting product like nicotine gum or inhalator) for those that are unsuitable for varenicline or prefer not to use it.

Advice on Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT)

Some clients think that using NRT is just swapping one addiction for another but this isn't true. Smoking is highly addictive. According to the WHO smoking is as addictive as heroin and cocaine, and it has the paradoxical effects of being a stimulant and a depressant. No other drug doses at such a high frequency: a pack-a-day smoker who smokes for 14 years will have more than 1 million dosing opportunities.

This is largely because it delivers nicotine very quickly to the brain and stimulates dopamine release. This makes stopping smoking difficult, particularly if stop smoking medication is not used. It's helpful to remind the client that nicotine levels in NRT are much lower than in tobacco. The way they deliver nicotine helps to relieve negative withdrawal symptoms without stimulating the dopamine reward system in the brain. Most health problems are caused by other components in tobacco (tar, carbon monoxide and various carcinogens), and not by nicotine. It is safer to use licensed nicotine-containing products than to smoke. Correct use of the products for the full 12 week period in reducing doses really helps with long term sustained quitting.

Pharmacists are encouraged to sign-post clients who want to quit to the free confidential, non-judgemental behavioural supports provided by the HSE (Freephone 1800 201 203 or www.quit.ie) and also to their General Practitioner if the client has a GMS card and wishes to avail of free stop smoking medications. For those pharmacists that have access to Healthlink please contact

quitmanager.TFI@hse.ie to register for electronic referral for behavioural support to quit. For those that don't have a GMS card and are concerned about costs its helpful to remind the client that stop smoking medication is recommended only for a short period (12 weeks treatment) and is always cheaper than smoking.

Free Quit information materials such as posters and leaflets can be ordered by Pharmacists via the website <https://www.healthpromotion.ie/publications>. You can register as a Health professional on this site and bulk order resources.

How to get in touch:

Freephone the HSE QuitLine 1800 201 203

Free Text QUIT to 50100

Visit Quit.ie and sign-up for a QUITplan

Anyone can sign up to a free, personalised Quit plan to help them stop smoking and decide how their plan will work with options of

- daily support via email and text message
- a personalised web page to track your progress
- one-to-one support from a trained advisor
- tips from people who've successfully stopped smoking

Contact your local stop smoking services

The HSE provides local stop smoking clinics nationwide. The details can be found on Quit.ie under 'Smoking Support Services'.

Usually the clinics provide face to face appointments but due to COVID-19 restrictions they are now over the phone or through online video calls.