

Tobacco

What is tobacco?

Products such as cigarettes, cigars, pipe tobacco, chewing tobacco, and wet and dry snuff contain dried leaves from the tobacco plant.

The main chemical in tobacco is nicotine, which is a stimulant drug that speeds up the messages travelling between the brain and body. It may be more addictive than heroin. Tar and carbon monoxide (a toxic gas) are also released when tobacco is burned, such as when it's smoked.

Electronic cigarettes (also known as E cigarettes) don't contain dried tobacco leaves, but they may still contain nicotine.

Street names

Ciggies, darts, durries, rollies, smokes, fags, butts, cancer sticks

How is tobacco used?

Tobacco is usually smoked in cigarettes. It is also smoked in cigars and pipes.

Effects of tobacco

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Tobacco affects everyone differently, based on:

- Size, weight and health
- Whether the person is used to taking it
- Whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- The amount taken
- The strength of the tobacco and how much is contained in the product

The following effects may be experienced:

- Feeling more alert, happy and relaxed
- Coughing
- Dizziness, headaches
- Fast heart beat
- Bad breath
- Tingling and numbness in fingers and toes
- Reduced appetite, stomach cramps and vomiting

Nicotine may be more addictive than heroin.

If a large amount of tobacco is taken the following effects may also be experienced:

- Confusion
- Feeling faint
- Seizures
- Fast breathing
- Respiratory arrest (stop breathing) and death

Some people believe that smoking 'light' or 'low tar' cigarettes is less harmful than regular cigarettes. However, there is little difference between the amount of chemicals inhaled by people who smoke 'light' cigarettes and those who smoke regular ones.

Long-term effects

Regular use of tobacco may eventually cause:

- Shortness of breath
- Coughing fits, asthma and lung diseases
- Regular colds or flu
- Loss of taste and smell
- Yellow, rotting teeth
- Yellow finger tips
- Early wrinkles
- Back pain
- Slower-healing wounds
- Mood swings
- Eye disease and hearing loss
- Stomach ulcers
- Difficulty having children (males and females)
- Irregular periods and early menopause (females)
- Difficulty getting an erection (males)
- Cancer (in many areas of the body)
- Stroke and brain damage
- Heart attack and disease
- Needing to use more to get the same effect
- Dependence on tobacco
- Financial, work and social problems

Passive smoking

Passive smoking is when someone breathes in smoke from other people smoking. Passive smoking can cause many of the health problems listed above, so it's important not to smoke near other people, particularly babies, children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and people with chronic respiratory conditions.

Using tobacco with other drugs

The effects of using tobacco with other drugs – including over-the-counter or prescribed medications – can be unpredictable and dangerous, and could cause:

- **Tobacco + benzodiazepines:** reduced effectiveness of benzodiazepines.
- **Tobacco + contraceptive pill:** increased risk of blood clots forming.

It's important to check with a medical professional about whether nicotine might affect any medications you are taking.

There is little difference between the amount of chemicals inhaled by people who smoke 'light' cigarettes and those who smoke regular ones.

Withdrawal

Giving up tobacco after using it for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without it. Withdrawal symptoms usually start within 2–3 hours after you last use tobacco. The symptoms may last from a few days to a few weeks. These symptoms can include:

- Cravings for a cigarette
- Irritability, anxiety and depression
- Restless sleep
- Eating more and putting on weight
- Trouble concentrating
- Headaches
- Coughing and sore throat
- Aches and pains
- Upset stomach and bowels

You may still crave a cigarette for months and years after giving up. It's important to ask for help if you need it. Call Quitline on 13 QUIT (13 7848).

Further Information

The Druginfo website has information on:

- Help & support services
- Treatment
- Pregnancy and breastfeeding
- References for this fact sheet

Go to druginfo.adf.org.au

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