

SMOKING CESSATION INTERVENTIONS: HOW THE GP CAN HELP

Norma Cronin

Tobacco is the leading cause of preventable deaths in the Western world and is a significant cause of mortality and morbidity. Half of all smokers will die from tobacco-related disease and of these 50% will die prematurely. Smoking is the greatest single preventable cause of premature death. In Ireland 7,000 people die every year from tobacco-related diseases. Smoking is the major cause of 90% of lung cancer deaths. In addition to lung cancer, smoking is an important cause of cancers of the larynx, pharynx, oesophagus, oral cavity, bladder, kidney, pancreas and cervix. Smoking is also a major contributing factor in the development of coronary heart disease (CHD) and is the most important of the known modifiable risk factors for CHD. There is also significant evidence that smoking is a major cause of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Irish smoking prevalence

Overall, 27% of the Irish population smoke: 28% of males and 26% of females. This is an overall decline of 4% since 1998. Despite this decline there are approximately one million smokers in Ireland. The good news is that 70% of smokers want to quit.

However, it is well accepted that smokers find it difficult to quit. This is because smoking is a complex issue, which involves:

- a physical dependence on nicotine;
- a psychological/emotional dependence, where the smoker may use cigarettes as a coping mechanism to deal with feelings such as stress or anger; and
- the automatic habit, which involves handling and lighting up the cigarette.

Effective intervention

Most of our patients expect health advice and are receptive to it. GPs have an important role and are uniquely placed to intervene with their patients. There is evidence from the Cochrane library which shows that for patients who are given brief advice from their GP, cessation rates sustained for one year are about 5% compared to 1% for non-intervention groups. A recent survey of 2,714 cigarette smokers (February 2001) at the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, US, showed that greater patient satisfaction was associated with physicians and nurses who discuss smoking cessation during a patient's visit.

How can health professionals make appropriate interventions with patients who smoke?

The issue of smoking can be raised opportunistically with all smokers, in a non-confrontational and positive manner, with the overall aim of increasing the smokers' motivation to

change. Previous approaches from healthcare professionals may have been to tell the patient to stop smoking without having established the stage the smoker is at on the wheel of change. However, research shows that cessation rates can be improved by matching the intervention with the client's position on the wheel of change

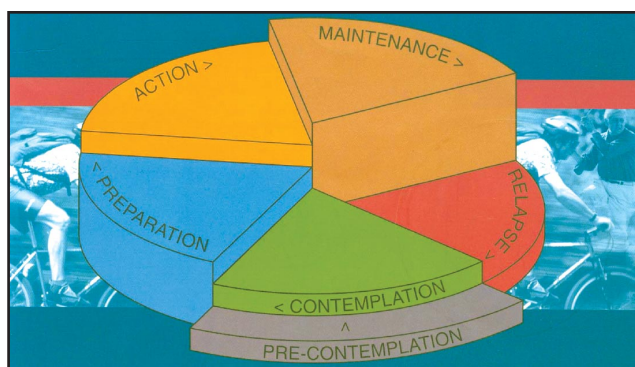


Figure 1. The stages of change (Prochaska and Di Clemente)

The Stages of Change Model is not new and has been used in relation to addictive behaviour for many years. It was first described by Prochaska and Di Clemente as a series of stages through which people pass in making a behaviour change. These stages are Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance and Relapse. At each stage a person is thinking and feeling differently about the problem behaviour and, therefore, will find different processes and interventions helpful at each stage to help them move through the cycle.

Stage-specific interventions for healthcare professionals

Pre-contemplation – contented smoker

- Accept that the smoker is not ready yet to make a decision.
- Offer friendly, non-judgemental advice.
- Offer information and further support.

Contemplation – smoker is no longer contented

- Assure the smoker that quitting is worthwhile.
- Assist the smoker in weighing up the pros and cons of quitting.
- Provide the Quit Smoking Advice Kit or leaflets on quitting smoking.
- Inform the patient of the benefits of quitting.
- Measure carbon monoxide, if equipment is available.
- Offer further support when decision is made to quit.

Preparation – smoker is making the decision to quit

- Assist in preparation for quitting by helping the smoker plan a strategy for quitting and coping mechanisms.
- Encourage smoker to set a quit date; give the 10 tips for quitting.
- Support the patient's decision to quit.
- Assess nicotine dependence.
- Discuss nicotine replacement therapies (NRTs) and other methods of quitting.
- Build up the patient's belief in their ability to change their behaviour.

Action – the smoker has set their quit date

- Arrange follow on support and encouragement.
- Suggest coping strategies to deal with withdrawals, cravings, concerns about weight gain and other issues.

Tips for cravings – the 4 Ds

Delay at least three minutes and the urge will pass.

Drink a glass of water or fruit juice.

Distract yourself. Move away from the situation.

Deep breathe. Breathe slowly and deeply.

Start saving money: encourage your patient to put away the amount of money they would normally spend on cigarettes. The 20-a-day smoker spends over €2,000 a year on cigarettes. Focus on the positive benefits of quitting. Inform the patient that withdrawal symptoms are temporary and decrease in intensity and frequency after a few weeks.

Maintenance – the smoker has quit smoking

- Applaud, support and encourage.
- Suggest strategies to prevent relapse.
- Focus on the positive benefits of quitting.
- Encourage new activities and non-smoking situations, e.g. exercise, new hobby.
- Advise them to avoid social triggers.

Relapse – smoker relapses

- Acknowledge relapse is part of the process and most smokers go back and forth between the stages before permanently stopping with a greater chance of success each time.
- Encourage the smoker to review the processes of contemplation without becoming stuck or demoralised.
- Review possible relapse situations such as stress, alcohol or social situations.
- Offer support and encouragement.

Many hospitals and GP practices have a smoking cessation service with healthcare professionals specially trained in smoking cessation. The patients can then be offered follow on support on a one-to-one basis or in a group setting. Many healthcare professionals have already undertaken training in brief intervention and training courses are available through the Irish Cancer Society and Health Boards.

The good news – the benefits of quitting

Within 20 minutes, blood pressure and pulse rate will return

to normal. Circulation improves in hands and feet, making them warmer.

- Within eight hours of stopping, the oxygen level in the blood will rise to normal and the carbon monoxide level will fall.
- Within 24 hours, the chance of suffering a heart attack and stroke begins to fall.
- Within 72 hours, people can hold more air in their lungs. Breathing becomes easier. Energy levels increase.
- Within days, blood is less likely to clot.
- Within five years, the risk of a heart attack falls to about half that of a smoker.
- Within 10 years, those who quit will have about the same risk of heart disease as someone who has never smoked and the risk of lung cancer falls to that of a non-smoker.

Pharmacotherapies

NRTs and Zyban

NRTs in the form of gum, patch, lozenge, microtab and inhaler are available over the counter from the pharmacist. They are also available to medical card holders from the GP. These products are recommended to suit the individual smoker. Success rates are doubled by the use of NRTs. With NRTs available on the GMS, it offers more opportunity for smokers to talk to their GP about quitting and avail of these therapies.

Bupropion (Zyban) is available on prescription from the GP. This is the first non-nicotine medication shown to be successful for smoking cessation. When used in a specialist setting it is shown to be at least twice as effective as placebo in helping patients to stop smoking.

Other support

The Irish Cancer Society has a Quitline, which is staffed by trained smoking cessation counsellors, who can advise on all methods of quitting and send out the Quit Smoking Advice Kit, free of charge. The Quitline is opened 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday. Call Save 1850 201 203; www.irishcancer.ie Information is also available from the Irish Heart Foundation, Tel: (01) 668 5001; www.irishheart.ie

Smoking cessation work is very worthwhile and saves lives. It is important that healthcare professionals are not discouraged by poor success rates and that every opportunity is taken to encourage their patients. Smoking cessation is the most important step that smokers can take to enhance the length and the quality of their lives.

*Norma Cronin
Irish Cancer Society*