

# You, too, can be a QUITTER!

Take it from someone who's  
seven years smoke-free

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**MORE AND MORE** in our modern society, people are talking about quitting cigarettes and other forms of tobacco, especially as the rising costs of health care and increasing awareness of the benefits of total body fitness have caused people to make smoking cessation a top social and personal goal. When I was 19, I had a serious tobacco addiction. I smoked a pipe, cigars and cigarettes; smoking was taking away not only my money but also my health. Still, there was nothing I liked better than bringing a book into a quiet restaurant or café and smoking away the hours. I had been a high-school athlete just one year before and, after leaving school, was running an average of a 48 kilometres week to stay in shape.

When I was turned down for what had been my dream job, to be a member of the Canadian Forces, I began a half-pack-a-day habit. As the years went by, I somehow had the idea that smoking was my one pleasure in life. About 10 years ago, I was in the hospital and was offered free nicotine patches. I saw many others quitting with this miracle invention and decided to give it a chance. The patch doesn't do everything, though; you still have to apply some willpower and find ways to deal with the physical aspects of the addiction. I ate a lot of candies and chewed on plastic stir sticks — and I kept myself well away from other smokers. When the cravings got really bad, I would try to sleep through them. It wasn't a foolproof method, but, by some miracle, I managed to quit.

One of the things I was most proud of at that point was just being able to say to people who tried to bum cigarettes from me, "Sorry, I don't smoke." Three months later, I forgot the pain smoking had caused me and the sheer cost of tobacco and started again. The irony? If I hadn't held on to an extra tin of tobacco after quitting, I likely would have quit back then for good. Time went on and as the original enjoyment of readjusting to life with cigarettes passed, smoking once again became a real millstone around my neck. Three years later, I was ready to quit

again. By that time, I was smoking about two packs a day, and all I seemed to do with my time and money was get up, roll a few cigarettes and sit sipping coffee and smoking until it was time to eat. Work was sporadic; I was a temp labourer at the time and somehow was able to get away with a poor level of fitness.

One day, in 2004, I noticed a sign in a doctor's office that said help was available to quit smoking. I had hoped for a program that would give me free nicotine patches, but this program offered more. It mentioned help from two separate support groups, plus one-on-one sessions with an addictions counsellor and even a pharmacist to monitor the nicotine replacement therapy.

## TODAY, THINGS HAVE CHANGED FOR QUITTERS.

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I joined the group. After scheduling an official quit date about a month away, we then reviewed the available therapies. I made the decision to attend the support groups, see the pharmacist and consult the MD specializing in addictions. I got to know other smokers and formed bonds with them and the nurse running the program. I think a good deal of my success had to do with not wanting to let these people down.

My quit date was coming up so I started off on the patch and nicotine gum. It was very encouraging to have both agents and to have knowledgeable people supporting me. I learned that I had not used the gum correctly the first time I quit. This time, the gum was a great support, giving me a boost of nicotine when my cravings got worse. Another powerful trick I used was finding a compelling mental image with which I could replace thoughts of cravings. Somewhat ghoulishly, I used the image of a scene from a popular movie in which people on a ship were transformed into corpses. This image of death and decay associated with smoking

got me through a lot of tough spots. In the first few days, I also took naps when I found myself having cravings.

Before long, I was once again a non-smoker. I had some terrible urges, but being able to do many laps at the pool and cycle long distances won out. From the day I quit to the day I write this, I have not had one cigarette. That was seven years ago. All in all, the process took about six weeks of counselling and patches, and I honestly think that if I hadn't taken advantage of all of the available support I wouldn't have accomplished it.

Today, things have changed for quitters. More treatment options and combination therapies, including antidepressants and

anti-craving agents, are available and more incentives, not the least of which is the price of tobacco, which — at least where I live — has doubled. As for my own condition, I am not back to my former athletic glory, but I do cycle and swim more often than I ever have. My whole quality of life has improved, and I've been able to travel on money I would have spent on cigarettes.

So how did I manage to beat the odds and quit? It all came down to being honest with myself — not denying that I was at risk for cancer or heart disease. My mother, a heavy smoker from 16 to 43, was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and put on oxygen. I knew that genetics was a huge factor in such diseases. The combined desire not to smoke around her and not to become a respiratory invalid was a huge motivator for me. Not only that, but a while before I made my decision, I had messed up a relationship with a fantastic person who couldn't stand smoke. I certainly did not want to end up alone and on oxygen living out the last of my greatly shortened days because

I had decided in 2004 to live in denial and keep on smoking.

Although the success rates for over-the-counter remedies are low, combining therapies and adding 300 minutes of counselling and peer support increase your success greatly. According to the British National Health Service, combination pharmaceutical therapy plus counselling up your chances from 7% to more than 26%. These figures can be a little discouraging, but when you keep trying, your chances of beating the habit increase.

Weight gain, of course, is an issue among many of those who quit, but, according to the Mayo Clinic website, it doesn't have to be. Increased attention to a healthy diet and an active lifestyle, now made easier by not smoking, and choosing healthy replacement snacks can get you through. The pharmacist I consulted told me that in order to match the health risks of being a smoker, I would have to gain 90 pounds.

So what does it all come down to? Why is it so important to extinguish that cigarette and never pick up another? For starters, studies have shown that within 10 years, lung cancer risk for a smoker who quits is cut in half, and 15 years after quitting, heart disease risk is basically that of a lifetime non-smoker, according to the Cleveland Clinic. But there is an immediate gain in quality of life. I'm able to work a physically demanding job as a stagehand that I could never have handled as a heavy smoker. I have the time (and extra money) to work out at the gym and even play some sports. Then there's the little things: smelling the scent of spring flowers like I haven't since I was 14, really tasting my food and sitting through a two-hour movie without sneaking out and coming back smelling of smoke.

Above all, I have the satisfaction of being a role model to my niece, who means the world to me, who will never see me smoke and, I hope, never start herself.

Start the new year off right. Talk to your doctor about quitting. 