

National No Smoking Day

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More support needed to help smokers quit for good

Visit your local pharmacy for support

The Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) is encouraging people to take the first step towards quitting by asking their local pharmacist for advice. The IPU is also calling for the removal of unnecessary barriers for people attempting to quit by ensuring that medical card holders are no longer required to attend a GP prior to being supplied with Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) at their pharmacy.

NRT is an effective approach to reduce the physical symptoms associated with quitting smoking. However, while NRT is available in pharmacies nationwide since 2014, medical card holders that cannot afford to pay the cost of the NRT are still unable to access this vital treatment directly from their pharmacies.

In order for medical card holders to access this treatment under the medical card scheme, they are required to visit a GP to obtain a GMS prescription that will entitle them to source the treatment from their local pharmacy. This creates an unnecessary barrier for would-be quitters.

There is no practical reason for this barrier to remain in place.

Community pharmacist and IPU President, Dermot Twomey said, “The rate of smoking has fallen steadily over the past five years in Ireland, and we must commend those who have given up smoking. However, 18% of the Irish population are smokers, with those aged 45 to 54 the most likely to smoke. This still paints a worrying picture, and it is clear we need to think differently about how we support people who want to quit smoking.”

Smoking rates are higher for those who are unemployed (38%) than those in employment (18%). They are also higher among those who have not completed the Leaving Certificate (22%) than those with a Leaving Certificate or higher (17%).

Mr Twomey continued: “NRT is proven to work and can significantly improve the chances that an attempt to quit will be successful. Unfortunately, medical card patients must go through their GP to access this treatment. At a time where GP shortages across the country have made it increasingly difficult to get an appointment, this is creating an unnecessary barrier for would-be quitters. There is no reason why a medical card patient should require a prescription to access NRT and this arbitrary rule is preventing Ireland from lowering its smoking rates.”

Mr Twomey also commented on the health benefits for those looking to quit smoking, “While the risks associated with smoking are well understood the benefits from quitting are spoken about less often. A smoker who quits will experience almost immediate health benefits such as improved breathing and energy levels as well as reducing the risk of coronary heart disease. All smokers should be encouraged by the significant improvements to their health that can happen if they quit.”

In conclusion he encouraged those looking to quit to visit their local pharmacy, “It can be challenging to overcome a smoking addiction and it is very important that smokers have the correct supports in place to help them improve their health. Smokers can speak to their local pharmacist to help them understand what method will work best for them and to receive advice on supports such as NRT to help manage cravings.”

Pharmacists’ Tips to Quit Smoking:

1. **Make a Plan:** You won’t quit by accident, planning in advance for when and how you will quit can really help. You should pick your quit date and stick to it no matter what. In advance of that date, plan the supports you will need as well as some activities to keep busy.
2. **Avoid Temptation:** All smokers have their triggers, the things that make them crave a cigarette. Particularly in the early days it is best to avoid these situations, trips to the pub can be particularly perilous. Remember a craving lasts about five minutes, so make plans

on how you will deal with them when they hit.

3. **Get Moving:** Exercise is proven to be a great way to minimise cravings. With the health benefits you get from quitting you should have more energy to engage in activities such as walking or running.
4. **Consider NRT:** There is no need to give up 'cold turkey,' Nicotine withdrawal can be very difficult and create physical symptoms as well as psychological. There are a number of options for nicotine replacement therapy and every person will have their own preferences. Consult your pharmacist for advice. If one method has not worked for you in the past, your pharmacist can recommend an alternate approach.
5. **Keep Busy:** Making plans to keep your mind and hands from being idle is really important. Plan a reward for yourself using some of the money you've saved by quitting.
6. **Make a list of why you're quitting:** If you are struggling for motivation having a list of why you quit can help you recover it. From health reasons to the social and financial benefits, there are plenty of reasons to quit. Keep the list close and read it whenever you are struggling.
7. **Keep Trying:** It's hard to quit smoking, many people will fail their first time or even multiple times. Don't be too hard on yourself, but review your plan, reset and start again.