

Exploring Habits, Smoking, and Vaping

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How do I know if a habit is healthy or unhealthy?

Habits can be *healthy* or *unhealthy*. If a habit contributes to your overall health in a positive way, it would be considered a healthy habit. If it doesn't contribute to your overall health in a positive way, then it is considered an unhealthy habit.

All habits—even unhealthy ones—serve us in some way. That is why we repeat them. As an example, smoking, vaping, or using e-cigs might temporarily ease your stress or anxiety, which is the reason why people often turn to these things. This decision may then lead to nicotine dependence, leading to psychological and physical factors that force your body to respond by giving it more nicotine.

However, using commercial tobacco products of any form is not good for your health. Therefore, even though smoking is effective in feeding a craving and reducing stress, it does not contribute positively to your overall health. Instead of using this risky response to stress, examples of less risky or healthier responses to stress and anxiety would be going for a walk, meditating for 5 minutes, calling a friend, working out, or making a healthy snack.

Smoking a cigarette, vaping, or consuming other forms of commercial tobacco may reduce stress right now (that's how the habit is serving you), but it **is not a healthy long-term behaviour**. What might seem effective in the short term can be really harmful to your health over time. The more we consume commercial tobacco products, the more clearly we can see its harmful effects through illnesses like cancer, heart disease, and stroke.

Before we explore habits further, it's important to understand that some habits can become an addiction. This is the case when the habit of smoking or vaping turns into nicotine dependence.





Unpacking addiction and nicotine dependence

Nicotine dependence (also called tobacco addiction) involves physical and psychological factors that make it difficult to stop using tobacco, even if the person wants to quit.

Nicotine releases a chemical called dopamine in the same regions of the brain as other addictive drugs. It causes mood-altering changes that make the person temporarily feel good. For example, inhaled smoke delivers nicotine to the brain within 20 seconds. This “rush” is a major part of the addictive process. When you stop using commercial tobacco, nicotine levels in the brain drop. This change triggers processes that contribute to the cycle of cravings and urges that maintains addiction (Refer to our How Habits Work document for more detail).

Signs and Symptoms

Nicotine dependence involves physical and psychological factors.

Signs of physical dependence on nicotine include:

- the urge to smoke or vape within 30 minutes of waking
- ranking the first cigarette or vape of the day as the most important
- smoking or vaping at regular intervals throughout the day.

Tobacco use causes feelings of pleasure and alertness, but people with nicotine dependence become tolerant to the desired effects. They may no longer experience pleasure from using tobacco, but they continue to use it because they have cravings and want to avoid nicotine withdrawal.

Signs and symptoms of nicotine withdrawal include:

- irritability
- restlessness
- anxiety
- insomnia
- difficulty concentrating
- fatigue

In addition to physical factors involved in nicotine dependence, there are psychological factors. People develop conditioned signals—triggers—for tobacco use. For example, some people always smoke after a meal or when they feel anxious. These triggers lead to behaviour patterns that can be difficult to change.

If you—or people you know—are struggling with nicotine dependence, we encourage you to reach out to a trusted friend or a family member. You can also reach out to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).



How do I recognize and avoid triggers that can lead to unhealthy habits?

One of the most practical ways to eliminate an unhealthy habit like smoking or vaping is to reduce exposure to the cue(s) that causes it. For example, if you are easily distracted by your phone notifications (cue) and can't seem to concentrate at school or at home, then turning off notifications or even leaving your phone in another room (reducing exposure) can produce a boost in your concentration and productivity. **When you reduce or eliminate the cue or trigger that causes the distraction, you are more likely—over time—to eliminate the unhealthy habits.**

Before you can reduce exposure to the cues that prompt an unhealthy habit, you must first recognize the cues. This is part of practicing self-reflection which, in turn, leads to self-awareness (a healthy habit!). Whenever you find yourself repeating an unhealthy habit, reflect on the following questions and take note of your answers:

- Who am I with when I am triggered to choose an unhealthy habit?
- What does my environment look like? feel like? sound like?
- What time of the day is it? Is it later in the day or morning?
- What happened to me recently that may be causing me to want to choose an unhealthy habit?
- Am I experiencing HALT? (hungry, angry, lonely, or tired) when I feel a craving?

