Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Frequently Asked Questions About COVID-19 and Smoking

This information answers common questions about how COVID-19 may affect you, your health, and your cancer care if you smoke. This includes smoking cigarettes, cigars, or electronic smoking devices, such as an e-cigarette, vape pen, or Juul®.

About smoking and your cancer care

Smoking during cancer treatment can keep chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery treatments from working as well as they should. Benefits of quitting smoking include:

- Cancer treatments working as well as possible.
- Having fewer side effects of treatment.
- Breathing better after surgery.
- Lower risk of cancer coming back.
- Lower risk of getting new cancers.
- Your heart and lungs work better.
- Better sleep and feeling less tired and having more

energy.

- Feeling less stressed and having a better quality of life.
- Improved self-esteem.
- Feeling more in control of your life.
- Lower risk of dying from cancer and other diseases.

We understand it can be overwhelming to quit smoking while going through stressful situations, such as cancer treatment and COVID-19. You do not have to do it alone. Talking with a healthcare provider who specializes in helping people who are quitting smoking can help.

MSK's Tobacco Treatment Program can provide emotional support and treatment for you and your family during this time. Read *Tobacco Treatment Guide: For Patients and Their Families* (www.mskcc.org/pe/tobacco-treatment-guide) to learn more about how you can quit smoking. You can also visit www.msk.org/tobacco or call our Tobacco Treatment Program at 212-610-0507.

FAQs about smoking and COVID-19

Does smoking increase my risk of getting COVID-19 and making the symptoms of COVID-19 worse?

At this time, we do not know if smoking will increase your chance of getting COVID-19. We do know that smoking

damages your lungs and that COVID-19 causes mild to severe breathing problems. This means that you're more likely to have worse symptoms if smoke and get COVID-19 than non-smokers who get COVID-19.

You're also more likely to:

- Need to go to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).
- Need to be hooked up to a ventilator (breathing machine) to help you breathe.
- Die from COVID-19.

Quitting smoking or smoking less will help you breathe better. It will also help you better manage your symptoms if you get sick with COVID-19.

If I get COVID-19, I don't want to make my symptoms worse. Is it safer to use an electronic smoking device (such as an e-cigarette, vape pen, or Juul) than to smoke cigarettes?

The safest and best thing you can do for your health is quit smoking. The chemicals in a cigarette or an electronic smoking device damage your cilia. Cilia are tiny hairs that move around to clear mucus and dirt from your airway so you can breathe easily. When the cilia are damaged, they cannot clean mucus and dirt from your lungs. This makes you more likely to get infections.

Not smoking or not using an electronic smoking device for even a few days will help your cilia grow back. This will give you a better chance of managing any symptoms if you get sick with COVID-19.

I don't smoke every day. If I get COVID-19, will my occasional smoking make my symptoms worse?

Breathing in any amount of smoke is bad for your health. Smoking even just 1 cigarette a day damages your cilia and raises your risk for heart disease and stroke. Not smoking every day may seem like it's safer, but there's no such thing as safe smoking.

There's no way to predict how sick you'll get from COVID-19. You can lower your chances of getting it from the start by following CDC guidelines. This includes:

- Washing your hands often.
- Avoiding close contact with people who are sick or who live outside of your home.

Even with a cancer and COVID-19 diagnosis, I'm having trouble quitting smoking. What should I do?

Many people smoke to cope with stress. Being diagnosed with cancer is stressful, and COVID-19 creates even more stress. You can also use these stressors as motivation to focus on your health and make changes to your life. These changes may take time, but quitting smoking will improve

your health and your cancer care.

Getting help and support to quit rather than doing it on your own will increase your chances of quitting. MSK has specialists who can help you quit smoking. Visit www.msk.org/tobacco or call 212-610-0507 to learn more about our Tobacco Treatment Program.

How will quitting smoking help me manage COVID-19 symptoms?

There are many benefits to quitting smoking. The 2 most important ones happen just 20 minutes after you smoke your last cigarette:

- Your blood pressure and pulse start to go back to normal levels.
- The cilia in your airway that didn't move well because of smoke start to move again. This helps clear your lungs and lower your risk for infection.

After 8 hours of not smoking, your oxygen levels start to go back to more normal levels. This helps your tissues and blood vessels get more oxygen so you can breathe better. This will make it easier for you to manage symptoms of COVID-19.

Smoking fewer cigarettes can help you manage both cancer and COVID-19, even before you quit smoking. Read

to learn more about how to manage COVID-19 symptoms.

MSK's Tobacco Treatment Program offers recommendations for safe and effective use of medications to help you quit smoking. This includes nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), bupropion (Zyban®), and varenicline (Chantix®). It also offers coaching and ongoing support to anyone who wants to quit or is thinking about quitting smoking. The program is open to everyone, including people with cancer, people who have never had cancer, and cancer survivors. We can also recommend other support services here at MSK and in your community.

The fear and worry about COVID-19 is giving me daily urges to smoke even though I quit. Can I smoke to help manage my stress?

Many people smoke to manage stress, but smoking only helps for a short time. Over time, smoking will make your stress worse. This is because between cigarettes, your body goes through withdrawal (physical and mental symptoms after you stop smoking). This makes you want another cigarette. This is what it means to be addicted to something.

Quitting smoking will:

- Make you feel better.
- Protect you from COVID-19.

- Help you find healthier ways to manage stress.
- Lower your overall stress after about 1 to 3 weeks.

Read to learn more about healthy ways to manage stress during this time.

As you think about quitting, it can help to talk to someone who quit smoking. Call 212-610-0507 to join our Tobacco Treatment Program online support group.

I'm a cancer survivor and I smoke 2 packs of cigarettes a day. Will my smoking affect my risk for getting COVID-19 even though I'm now cancer-free?

You're more likely to have worse symptoms if smoke and get COVID-19 than non-smokers who get COVID-19. Some cancer treatments can also weaken your immune system. This makes it harder for your body to fight off viruses like COVID-19. Quitting smoking will help keep you healthy and safe no matter where you are in your cancer care.

The Tobacco Treatment Program is also open to cancer survivors. To learn more about MSK's Tobacco Treatment Program, watch this video:

Please visit www.mskcc.org/pe/tobacco-treatment to watch this video.

Additional resources

American Cancer Society (ACS)

What We Know About Tobacco Use and COVID-19
www.cancer.org/health-care-professionals/center-for-tobacco-control/what-we-know-about-tobacco-use-and-covid-19.html

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Frequently Asked Questions About COVID-19 and Smoking - Last updated on July 23, 2024
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