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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Frequently Asked Questions About COVID-19 and Smoking

It's normal to feel stressed, scared, or worried about COVID-19, especially if you smoke or have breathing problems. This information answers some frequently asked questions (FAQs) about how COVID-19 may affect you, your health, and your cancer care if you smoke cigarettes, cigars, or use an electronic smoking device (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. Quitting smoking comes with many benefits, including:

- Helping your cancer treatments work as well as possible.
- Lowering the amount of side effects you'll have.
- Helping improve your breathing after surgery.
- Lowering your risk of your cancer coming back.
- Lowering your risk of getting new cancers.
- Helping your heart and lungs work better.

- Improving your sleep and helping you feel less tired and have more energy.
- Helping you feel less stressed and have a better quality of life.
- Improving your self-esteem.
- Helping you feel more in control of your life.
- Lowering your risk of dying from cancer and other diseases.

We understand that quitting smoking while going through other stressful situations, such as cancer treatment and COVID-19, can be overwhelming. You don't have to do it alone. Talking with a healthcare provider who specializes in helping people who are quitting smoking. Memorial Sloan Kettering's (MSK's) Tobacco Treatment Program can provide emotional support and treatment for you and your family during this time. For more information about how you can quit smoking, read our resource *Tobacco Treatment Guide: For Patients and Their Families* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/tobacco\\_treatment\\_guide](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/tobacco_treatment_guide)), call our Tobacco Treatment Program at 212-610-0507, or visit [www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/tobacco-treatment](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/tobacco-treatment).

## **FAQs About Smoking and COVID-19**

### **Does smoking increase my risk of getting COVID-19 and make the symptoms of COVID-19 worse?**

At this time, we don't 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 if you keep smoking and you become sick with COVID-19, you're more likely to have worse symptoms than someone who doesn't smoke and gets 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 and 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, which 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 can't do their job of cleaning mucus and dirt from your lungs. This makes you more likely to get infections. But, not smoking or not using an electronic smoking device for even a few days will help your cilia grow back and 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 increases your risk for heart disease and stroke, and damages your cilia. While not smoking every day may seem like it's safer, 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](#), such as [washing your hands often](#) and 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?**

Being diagnosed with cancer is stressful, and COVID-19 creates even more stress. Many people use smoking as a way to cope with stress. But 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's Tobacco Treatment Program can help. For more information, call 212-610-0507 or visit

[www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/tobacco-treatment](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/tobacco-treatment).

## 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 and the cilia in your airway that didn't move well because of smoke start to move again to 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.

You may not have quit smoking yet, but just smoking fewer cigarettes can help you manage both cancer and COVID-19. MSK's Tobacco Treatment Program offers recommendations for safe and effective use of medications to help you quit smoking, such as nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), bupropion (Zyban<sup>®</sup>), and varenicline (Chantix<sup>®</sup>). 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.

For more information about how you can manage COVID-19 symptoms, read *Managing COVID-19 at Home*

([www.mskcc.org/pe/covid\\_home](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/covid_home)).

**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 and will make your stress worse over time. This is because between cigarettes, your body goes through withdrawal (physical and mental symptoms after you stop smoking) and wants another cigarette. This is what it means to be addicted to something. Quitting smoking will lower your overall stress after about 1 to 3 weeks.

Quitting smoking will make you feel better, protect you from COVID-19, and help you find healthier ways to manage stress. For more information about healthy ways to manage stress during this time, read our resource *Managing Stress and Anxiety Caused by COVID-19*

([www.mskcc.org/pe/stress\\_anxiety\\_covid](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/stress_anxiety_covid)).

Talking to someone you know who quit smoking may be helpful to you as you think about quitting. Join our Tobacco Treatment Program online support group by calling 212-610-0507.

**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?**

If you smoke and get COVID-19, you're more likely to have worse symptoms than someone who doesn't smoke and gets COVID-19. Some cancer treatments can also weaken your immune system, making it harder for your body to fight off viruses, like COVID-19. This means that quitting smoking, no matter where you are in your cancer care, will help keep you healthy and safe.

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



Please visit [www.mskcc.org/pe/tobacco\\_treatment\\_guide](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/tobacco_treatment_guide) 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](http://www.cancer.org/health-care-professionals/center-for-tobacco-control/what-we-know-about-tobacco-use-and-covid-19.html)

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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