Weight gain and smoking cessation

Key messages

- For many smokers, especially females, fear of weight gain is a barrier to quitting.
- Generally, smokers maintain a lower mean body weight than non-smokers
- When people stop smoking, weight gain is common – especially in the first two years, with an average gain of around 5-6 kg.
- These effects can be anticipated and managed, especially with the help of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT).

Some of the reasons for this include:

- Nicotine from tobacco is known to suppress appetite, so smokers are inclined to eat less food, less often
- Tobacco smoking has been shown to increase metabolism slightly, leading your body to burn more energy (but placing greater strain on your heart)
- When people stop smoking, their appetite increases and many people regain their ability to taste food – this can lead them to eat more than usual
- People quitting smoking often crave sweet, sugary foods which are typically high in calories

- While these factors can make continued smoking seem appealing, they can be managed – whereas, continued smoking leaves your body exposed to enormous health risk.

Reducing the likelihood of weight gain when stopping smoking:

- NRT and Zyban (bupropion) can reduce post cessation weight gain, at least for as long as it is taken.\(^1\)
- People who use the recommended dose of NRT, for the recommended period, gain less weight than those who use lesser amounts.\(^2\)

- Those preparing to stop smoking should be encouraged to anticipate an increased desire for food and the likely cravings for sweet treats – having healthy snacks on hand, such as fruit or vegetables, may be helpful.
- People who do stop smoking will also commonly find they have greater energy, making it easier to increase the level of physical activity which will also help.

It does not need to be a choice between being slim or quitting smoking. Health professionals can assist those preparing to quit by helping them anticipate, and prepare, these factors.

