

Quitting the smoking habit—for good

By Ginny Smith
Photography by
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OF THE 44.5 MILLION ADULT SMOKERS in the United States, 70 percent want to quit and 40 percent make a serious attempt to quit each year. But less than 5 percent succeed in a given year, according to experts assembled recently by the National Institutes of Health.

The low success rate is partly because tobacco is so addictive, the experts said, but also because many people don't get the help that is proven to work—telephone quit lines, counseling, and medications to help with cravings. Medications include nicotine replacement therapy and bupropion.

Group Health members are an exception. They have access to the proven Free & Clear® Quit For Life™ Program, a covered benefit with no out-of-pocket costs for eligible members. The program provides written materials, individual telephone counseling or group classes, access to medications, and a toll-free help line.

The Quit For Life Program—used by state governments, companies, and health care systems,

nationwide—has helped thousands of people successfully quit tobacco over the last 20 years. What's more, 1 in 4 tobacco users who participate in the program kick the habit for good, compared with 1 in 10 who quit by using nicotine replacement therapy alone. Only 1 in 20 are able to quit on their own, cold turkey.

To find out more about the program, go to www.freeclear.com/ghc, or call toll-free 1-800-462-5327. Your family and friends who aren't Group Health members can get more information about quitting from the Washington State Tobacco Quit Line by calling toll-free 1-877-270-STOP(7867).

Northwest Health checked in with some of the people who have quit, using the Free & Clear Program, and asked them which tools worked best for them.



Doug Warnaca

Age 59, Building materials salesman, Seattle

"My daughter Wendy brought me a Free & Clear brochure and it sat around the house for a while. I had smoked for 36 years and was convinced I couldn't quit. Then I gave Free & Clear's eight-week quitting class a shot. The first night the group leader asked us to start 'fading,' which means continuing to smoke the same number of cigarettes, but a type that has a lighter load of nicotine. When the day came to actually quit, I started using the patches. The first two weeks were the worst, but then I was over the hump.

I liked the group participation. As we all shared about our experiences and gave each other encouragement, I

felt as much like a healer as the one being healed. I focused on making it through one day, and then the next. It's been five years now, and I think it would take a gun to my head to make me smoke.

But the Free & Clear quit coaches warn you not to test yourself by holding or smelling a cigarette. Your brain will say 'I remember that and I liked that.' Then all the time you've been smoke-free is back to zero as far as your brain is concerned."



Loree John

Age 52, Tax accountant, Ellensburg

"At work, I was the only smoker—and an outcast. My adult daughter refused to come into our house because of my smoking, and I'm sure that secondhand smoke caused my son to get asthma, and my dog to die. I hated smoking, but I couldn't seem to quit.

With help from Free & Clear, I had my last cigarette on Aug. 31, 2005. The telephone quit coaches were so positive and uplifting, and made a big deal out of every little success. They talked to me about the issues in my life, how I was handling them, when I felt I needed a cigarette, and how to avoid the urge. I rubbed a polished rock or ate a fat-free, sugar-free Jelly Belly bean when I felt like smoking. I spent more time on my computer, to keep my hands busy, and I gardened a lot. There's no way to smoke with gloves on and dirt everywhere. I also drank a glass of water when I wanted a cigarette, and that helped."



George Spellman

Age 47, Human resources manager, Seattle

I'd done that before and just ended up a fat smoker. Instead, I kept my eye on the prize: improved health and self-esteem. Now I wake up feeling better—no more coughing. I have the stamina to take long walks and jog. My clothes no longer smell and my teeth don't need to be cleaned nearly as often."

"After smoking for about 30 years, and trying dozens of times to quit, I gave it another try at my Group Health doctor's urging. I think it was the combination of support from the Free & Clear quit coaches, the patch, and really wanting to quit that worked for me. I didn't think of quitting as torture, or as being deprived. I thought of it as a chance to change something I didn't like about myself. I was suddenly just done with cigarettes.

I wanted to quit without taking up some other bad habit—like overeating.

Trevor Johnson Age 30, Boat rigger, Grapeview
“I started smoking when I was 15 because all my friends smoked. I tried to quit five or six times over the years, but didn’t make it. Then in January 2006, I chose a specific day to quit and called Free & Clear. They sent me the patches and a whole packet of information. I quit and I haven’t had a cigarette since.

Ninety percent of the reason I was successful was because I really wanted to quit. My wife was very supportive, and the Free & Clear coaches reminded me of all the things I hate about smoking—smelling like an ashtray and burning holes in my new truck’s interior. I didn’t use any of the patches. Instead, I chewed on those red stir straws and bubble gum for about six months.”

Deb McFall Age 50, Medical office worker, Lacey
“The first time I quit was when I was 28, and I did it cold turkey. I would buy cigarettes, smoke one, get mad at myself, and tear them all to pieces. An hour later, I’d be taping them back together. But I did quit.

Then, at 44, I hit a stressful stage in my life and bought into the lie that smoking would reduce my stress. But it only made me more stressed about having to quit again, and the horrible financial burden of buying cigarettes.

After two years of smoking, I called Free & Clear and signed up. I started taking bupropion (Wellbutrin/ Zyban), an oral medication that helped with the cravings. The program also offered a toll-free number I could call anytime for moral support. And the quit coaches called me periodically to see how I was doing.

It’s been four years now and I’m still smoke-free. Quitting wasn’t easy, but it’s very satisfying when you succeed. I have diabetes, and I know I’ve reduced my risk of some health complications by quitting.

If you want to quit, don’t give up. Keep trying. If I can beat this, so can you.”

Study tests new anti-smoking pill

The Group Health Center for Health Studies (CHS) is now recruiting participants for a COMPASS study that will evaluate smoking cessation tools—including a new anti-smoking pill. The medication is called varenicline (Chantix®) and was approved by the FDA in June 2006.

“Early clinical studies suggest that varenicline is possibly more effective than current medications, and might have fewer side effects,” says Jennifer McClure, a scientific investigator with CHS. “It looks promising.”

The medication doesn’t contain any nicotine, but binds to nicotine receptors in the brain—just as nicotine does. By doing that, it reduces the symptoms associated with withdrawal from nicotine and makes it easier for an individual to quit and not go back. The medication also dampens the effects of nicotine in case a smoker has a relapse.

All study participants will receive help in quitting, using varenicline and either phone-based counseling, a Web-based treatment program, or a combination of phone, Web, and medication. Participants will be screened to determine whether they meet the study’s criteria, and whether the drug is appropriate for them. For more information, call toll-free 1-800-604-4011.

“Group Health is reviewing the large clinical studies that have been published to evaluate varenicline’s safety and effectiveness,” says Jodi Ready, MD, Group Health’s tobacco cessation clinical lead.

The Pharmacy and Therapeutics (P&T) Committee, a committee of Group Health doctors and pharmacists, will soon review this data and decide whether to add the drug to our formulary. Until that decision is made, only study participants will have access to the medication as a covered benefit.

Greg Stewart Age 55, RN first assistant, Mukilteo
“I had smoked on and off since I was a teenager, and quitting—using just willpower—had never worked. But then I got married and decided I wanted to live a long, healthy life with my wife, Maureen. So I quit.

I credit Maureen with much of my success. She put the patch on me every morning, so she was participating in the process, and gave me rewards—like a T-shirt, or a dessert—every week. Free & Clear provided the patches, great

support over the phone, and a Quit Guide with some helpful tips. I cut up a drinking straw into cigarette-length pieces and kept a piece in my car. When I felt like smoking, I’d put the straw in my mouth and inhale and exhale, just like I was smoking. The urge would pass.

Instead of smoking after a meal, I’d go brush my teeth. I quit hanging out with friends who smoked. And I looked for new ways to relieve stress.”