

App addresses challenges women face trying to quit smoking

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/public domain

When it comes to quitting smoking, women may need some extra motivation, researchers say.

"Women are more likely to gain weight than men when they quit [smoking](#), and women have more difficulty losing weight when they gain it," said Judith Gordon, associate professor with the Department of

Family and Community Medicine and associate head of research at the University of Arizona College of Medicine.

She said that's why UA researchers are part of an interdisciplinary team that developed a pilot app to remind women smokers that their health is more important than being thin.

The team recently released the free Android app, called See Me Smoke-Free. A two-year, \$366,400 National Cancer Institute grant funded the effort.

Gordon said the app motivates users with inspirational messages and uses audio recordings to inspire confidence.

"Even if they do gain a little bit of weight, they realize that they're healthy, and they're beautiful and strong," she said. "That's more important than a couple of pounds."

Gordon, head of the app's research team, said almost 100 women have downloaded See Me Smoke-Free so far.

Peter Giacobbi Jr., associate professor in the College of Physical Activity and Sport Sciences at West Virginia University and part of the app's research team, said the key to the app's novelty is its use of guided [imagery](#), a technique that focuses the imagination through suggestion.

"I spent a lot of time with the team developing short audio files that guide people through scenes and experiences to help them [quit smoking](#)," he said.

Giacobbi said studies show guided imagery can do many things, including reducing stress, motivating people to exercise, quelling food cravings and preventing smoking.

But researchers have never tried it on such a scale, he said.

"It has been shown to be effective with smoking trials, but never used over a cellphone," Giacobbi said. "And so we really want to show that this can potentially reach millions of women around the world."

Cynthia Thomson, a professor at the UA College of Public Health and director of the Arizona Smokers' Helpline, which offers counseling to those trying to quit, said promoting a healthy lifestyle is a good way to help kick the habit.

"A lot of times, health behaviors kind of cluster," she said. "And so if someone is smoking, and they're trying to quit, it may make sense to work with them on getting them more physically active and also trying to eat healthier."

Thomson said most people smoke as a response to stress, and guided imagery may also help smokers quit by helping them relax.

"I'm not aware of any other app that's used guided imagery to deal with the issue of stress related to smoking," she said.

Toni Runner, who was able to quit for three years after 27 years of smoking, said she recently started again because of the stress of her job.

She said now she's had to start the process of quitting all over again.

"It's a struggle within myself," Runner said. "I jump on a bike and just keep riding whenever I feel a craving."

She said she thinks guided imagery might further help reduce that stress.

"Every little thing helps when you're trying to quit smoking," she said.

But Traci Shelton, a smoker for 15 years who has considered quitting, said she's skeptical that See Me Smoke-Free could have any effect.

"If you want to quit, the inspiration is already there," she said. "So I don't think an app is going to make any difference."

Giacobbi, the expert on guided imagery for the [app](#)'s research team, said guided imagery will only work on those who are willing to try it.

"It's probably going to be similar to other complementary medical techniques in that if you're open to it, it'll be effective," he said.

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