

Q&A: Why you should quit smoking even after a cancer diagnosis

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Dear Mayo Clinic: My father, who is 68, just started treatment for bladder cancer. He's been a smoker since his 20s, and his oncologist is strongly encouraging him to quit. It seems like trying to stop smoking now, while

he's going through chemotherapy, will just add more stress to a tough situation. Is this really the best time to work on his smoking?

A: Thank you for your question. I appreciate you sharing this information about your father. Now is an ideal time for your father to stop smoking. Quitting smoking in the face of a [cancer](#) diagnosis can have many advantages, including the potential for better [treatment](#) outcomes, reduced risk of cancer recurrence and improved [overall health](#) . In addition, your father will have a reliable source of support in his care team that he can turn to as he works through the process of quitting smoking.

The link between smoking and [lung cancer](#), as well as head and neck cancers, has been clearly established. Smoking has been implicated in other types of cancer, too, including bladder and other gastrointestinal cancers, such as cancer of the stomach, kidney, pancreas, colon and rectum.

Quitting smoking after being diagnosed with one of these cancers can lower the risk of the cancer coming back after treatment. It also reduces the risk of developing another type of cancer in the future. Quitting smoking can positively affect cancer treatment. Using tobacco while taking chemotherapy can cause variations in the way the body reacts to the medication. Research has shown that nonsmokers typically respond better and more predictably to chemotherapy, and they have fewer side effects as a result of their treatment, than smokers. Nonsmokers also experience fewer side effects as a result of radiation therapy than smokers. After cancer treatment is finished, the long-term health benefits of not smoking also are significant. Quitting smoking can dramatically improve heart and lung health. It can lower [blood pressure](#) and [heart rate](#); reduce the risk of coronary artery disease and heart disease; ease lung symptoms of smoking, such as shortness of breath and coughing; and increase physical stamina. Therefore, quitting smoking

can add years to a person's life. While quitting smoking is never easy, many people diagnosed with cancer are eager to take steps to improve their health. Some may have attempted without success to quit in the past, and a cancer diagnosis can motivate them to give it another try. Family members and friends often are willing to step up and encourage them in their efforts to improve their health at this time, too. Being in a health care environment regularly during cancer treatment can be a useful motivator. Patients cannot smoke in a hospital or other health care facilities, and that alone may lead to a decrease in smoking. And members of the care team have ready access to various resources to help people stop smoking. The path to successfully quitting smoking is the same for cancer patients as it is for other people. That process is simple but not easy. It usually involves a combination of behavioral therapy—typically counseling and support from professionals with expertise in smoking cessation—along with medication treatment to ease nicotine withdrawal symptoms and reduce the urges to smoke that often drive people to relapse when they try to quit. Encourage your father to take his oncologist's advice and [quit smoking](#). Assure him that you will support his efforts and his care team will be available to help. Quitting [smoking](#) will have significant health benefits for him now, during and after cancer treatment.

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