

A Real-World Guide
to Quitting Tobacco
on Your Own Terms

Rewrite the Rules

The right way
to quit is the way
that works for you.



Who Says There's Only One Right Way to Quit?

Forget the pressure to do it perfectly. This is about finding a way that works for you — on your timeline, in your own way.

If you're here, you've probably heard a lot of advice about quitting smoking or vaping. Some of it might have come from doctors. Some from friends or family. Some from ads or headlines that make it sound like there's just one way to do it—and if you don't get it right the first time, you've failed.

That's not how it works.

The truth is, quitting looks different for everyone. Some people stop all at once. Some take it one day at a time. Some cut back slowly. Some try a few different methods before they find what actually sticks (Did you know? It takes, on average, between 7 and 30 attempts to quit smoking before it sticks - no joke). None of these ways is better or worse. What matters is that it works for you, when you're ready, on your own terms.

This isn't another "quit or die" guide. You won't find scare tactics or guilt trips here. What you will find is real information about how quitting actually works, what's been proven to help, and how to start thinking about the kind of change that feels right for you.

Because the first step isn't quitting. The first step is just getting curious about what's possible.

And that's exactly what you're doing right now.

Let's get into it.

Why the Rules Are Rigged Against You

If quitting feels harder than it should, it's not just you — it's the system.

Let's talk about why quitting can feel so frustrating. It's not just about nicotine being addictive (though it absolutely is). It's also about how some communities have been deliberately targeted and left behind.

Tobacco companies have spent decades marketing directly to LGBTQ+ people. They've shown up in queer bars, at Pride events, in our media, and in our neighborhoods — not to support us, but to sell to us. When the rest of the world ignored or rejected us, they saw an opening. They made smoking and vaping seem like a part of belonging.

And it worked.

LGBTQ+ people still use tobacco at higher rates than the general population. That's not because we care less about our health. It's because we've been sold something that's deeply connected to identity, survival, and social connection.

So what does this mean for you?

At the same time, many of us haven't had access to affirming, culturally competent healthcare. We've had to figure out a lot on our own — including how to quit.

It means if quitting has felt especially hard, that doesn't mean you've failed. It means you've been up against more than just a habit. It means you've had to navigate systems that profit off your pain and make it harder to walk away.

But knowing this gives you something powerful: clarity. Clarity about who benefits from keeping you hooked, clarity about what you're really walking away from, and clarity about the fact that you don't owe these systems anything.

You get to choose something different and unlearn what was sold to you.

You get to build something better.

Quitting for

Your Health, Your Hormones, and Your Healing

If you're on hormones or considering surgery, quitting now can support your body in big ways.

Smoking affects everyone — but **if you're taking hormones or planning for gender-affirming surgery, it can impact your health in ways that are important to know about.** You don't have to quit smoking to access gender-affirming care. But reducing or quitting can give your body the support it needs to stay safe, heal well, and get the most out of your care

Hormones and Blood Clots

If you're on feminizing hormone therapy like estradiol, smoking can increase your risk of blood clots — especially in your legs or lungs. Those risks are already slightly higher for people on certain types of hormones, and smoking adds more pressure to your cardiovascular system.

The good news? You don't have to be smoke-free to start hormones. But quitting or cutting back can reduce that risk significantly. If hormone therapy is part of your care, talk to your provider about how quitting might fit into your plan.

Surgery and Recovery

Thinking about surgery in the future? Many surgeons require you to stop smoking before any procedure — especially gender-affirming surgeries. That's because tobacco slows down your body's ability to heal, raises your chance of post-op complications, and increases blood clot risk due to movement restrictions during recovery.

Even if surgery is a long way off, quitting now gives you time to build new coping tools and make healing easier when the time comes.

Even if surgery isn't part of your plan right now

Gender-affirming care doesn't always include surgery — and that's valid. But quitting can still support your goals. You might feel stronger, breathe easier, or experience fewer health risks while taking hormones. You might also just feel better knowing your body is getting what it needs to take care of you.

This isn't about doing everything perfectly.

It's about giving your body more of what it needs to show up for you —

through transition, through healing, through whatever's next.



Let's bust some myths that might still be standing in your way.

What You've Heard Isn't the Whole Truth

Let's clear up some of the biggest myths that make quitting harder than it has to be.

There's no shortage of advice out there about how to quit. The problem is, a lot of it is outdated, oversimplified, or just plain wrong. Let's unpack a few of the biggest myths that get in the way vs what's actually true.

Myth Vaping and nicotine pouches are safer than smoking.

Reality Vaping might feel like the healthier option, but it still delivers addictive nicotine and other chemicals that affect your lungs, heart, and brain. And it's not just vapes — nicotine pouches like ZYN have exploded in popularity, especially among younger adults. They're marketed as "clean" or "safe," but they still keep your brain dependent on nicotine, and we don't yet know the long-term health effects. Whether you're inhaling it or tucking it in your lip, it's still keeping you hooked. You may have swapped one habit for another, but that doesn't mean you have to stop there. You deserve to move forward, not sideways.

Myth You have to quit cold turkey to do it right.

Reality Cold turkey works for some people, but most do better with a mix of tools like nicotine replacement, medication, and support. There's no medal for doing it the hardest way; you don't need to suffer through it to make it count.

Myth You just need more willpower.

Reality Nicotine hijacks your brain's chemistry. Cravings, restlessness, irritability... they're all part of how withdrawal works. This isn't about weakness. It's about biology. And there are tools that can help take the edge off while your body recalibrates (we'll share some later in this guide).

Myth If you've tried to quit before and it didn't stick, you've failed.

Reality Quitting isn't a one-time decision, it's a daily process. Remember that it takes between 7 and 30 attempts, on average, before quitting really "sticks." Every day you smoke less, every moment you resist a craving, every reset you try again—it all counts. There's no end point where you've "made it." Quitting isn't a finish line, it's something you keep showing up for.

Myth Smoking is the best way I have to manage stress.

Reality It might feel like it helps, but nicotine actually keeps your body locked in a stress loop. It raises your heart rate and blood pressure, then leaves you tense again once the nicotine wears off. When you quit, you give your body the chance to settle into real calm, not just temporary relief.

Myth If I cut back instead of quitting fully, it doesn't really count.

Reality Cutting back is harm reduction. Every cigarette or vape you skip helps your body heal. You don't have to be perfect for it to matter. Less is still better, and it can be a powerful first step.

Myth Smoking or vaping won't really affect me until later in life.

Reality The damage starts early, even if you don't feel it yet. You're more likely to deal with tightness in your chest, a constant cough, lingering colds, or feeling winded during everyday activities. Your immune system takes a hit, too. But the good news is, your body starts repairing itself the moment you stop... which also means that it's never too late, no matter how long you've been smoking.

Myth I only smoke socially, so it's not a big deal.

Reality Even occasional use keeps nicotine in your system and your brain hooked. It might not feel like a full-on habit, but it's still forming patterns that are harder to break later. You can interrupt that pattern now, before it grows roots.

Myth You have to hit rock bottom before you quit.

Reality You don't need a crisis to make a change. You can quit just because you want to feel better. Just because you're tired of it. Just because it's time.

The bottom line?

A lot of what you've heard about quitting isn't the full picture. You don't have to do it perfectly. You just have to do it your way.

Let's talk about how.

Rewrite the Rules – Your Way

There's no single path to quitting. Let's find the one that fits you.

Now that we've cleared up what's not true, let's talk about what is. You don't have to quit the way anyone else did. You don't even have to know exactly where to start. You just need one small move that feels possible right now.

Here are a few real, doable ways to begin:

Cut back, don't cut off. You don't have to go all-in overnight. Start by smoking or vaping a little less. Delay your first one of the day. Check in with yourself before each cigarette and skip the ones you don't really want or that you feel confident to turn down. Stretch the time between them, even by 5 or 10 minutes. It all adds up.

Use nicotine replacement or medication. You don't have to fight cravings with willpower alone. Patches, gum, lozenges, inhalers, and nasal sprays can help you stay in control. So can prescription meds like Bupropion or Varenicline. These aren't shortcuts; they're tools that give your brain and body a break while you rewire the habit.

Plan for your patterns. Take a minute to think: When do you usually smoke or vape? First thing in the morning? In the car? On breaks? After meals? Around certain people? Write those down. Then pick one and try something different next time—step outside for air, drink water, chew on a toothpick, text someone, move your body. You don't need a perfect plan, just a backup for when that craving hits.

Try harm reduction. Not ready to quit completely? You can still reduce the harmful impacts of smoking. Try one (or more) of these methods:

- Go longer between each smoke or vape
- Set smoke-free or vape-free zones (like your bedroom or car)
- Switch to lower-nicotine options, if available
- Use NRT to help taper without triggering withdrawal

Explore free quit apps. If you prefer to go at your own pace, there are apps that can help you track cravings, see your progress, and stay motivated. Some even show how much money you've saved or help you build new habits day by day. We'll share some of the most helpful options later in this guide.

Get personal support. Whether it's a coach, a quitline, a group, or just someone you trust, having support makes a difference. Not because you can't do it alone, but because you shouldn't have to do things the harder way.

How to Quit When Life Keeps Happening

Quitting isn't hard because you don't know it's good for you. It's hard because life doesn't stop just because you're trying.

Cravings don't always show up in private, and stress doesn't wait until you're ready. And friends, coworkers, or routines you've built over years don't suddenly disappear the moment you decide to quit.

Keep reading for some of the most common “but what about...” moments, and how to handle them when they come up.

As promised, the “but what about...” moments.

1 What if I'm around friends who smoke or vape?

You don't have to avoid your people. You can set a boundary—like stepping outside but standing farther away, or meeting up somewhere that's not centered around smoking. If they're supportive, let them know what you're working on. If they're not, that's okay too. This is your decision, not theirs.

2 What do I do on my smoke breaks if I'm not smoking? What if everyone goes outside without me now that I've quit?

Smoke breaks are really about stepping away. You still get to take breaks. Step outside. Text someone. Stretch. Breathe. If it helps, go out with them, but keep your hands busy or bring water. You still belong, even if you're not lighting up.

3 What if I'm out drinking and I know I'm going to want one?

We get it: Alcohol lowers your defenses. You can still go out, but try to make a plan first. Bring gum or a mint. Hold your drink with both hands. Let someone you trust know you're trying not to smoke or vape so that they don't ask if you want one, or so they can help you resist. The urge might show up... but that doesn't mean you have to follow it.

4 What do I do when the cravings hit hard and I feel like I'm going to cave?

Cravings peak fast, but they do pass. Try waiting five minutes before acting on it. Get up. Move around. Drink something cold. Text someone. Chew something. Every time you wait it out, you prove to yourself you can.

5 What if I mess up and have one—should I just give up on quitting?

Not even close. One slip doesn't undo your progress. It's a moment, not a failure. Notice what led to it, let it go, and keep moving. You don't have to start over; you just keep going.

6 What do I say if someone offers me one?

Keep it short and simple:

- “No thanks, I'm quitting.”
- “Not tonight.”
- “I'm good.”

You don't owe anyone an explanation. Say what works for you.

7 What if I live with someone who smokes or vapes?

Talk to them. Ask if they'll smoke outside. Set up a smoke-free zone in your home or car. You can't control their behavior, but you can protect your space.

8 What if I start feeling more stressed or anxious without it?

Nicotine tricks your body into thinking it's calming down, but it's really just easing the withdrawal it caused. That stress will settle with time. In the meantime, find something else that helps your body let go—movement, breathing, water, quiet.

9 What do I do with my hands if I'm used to always having something to hold or puff on?

Keep them busy. Drink from a water bottle. Use a fidget or pen. Scroll your phone if that helps. The urge to do something will fade over time.

10 What if I miss out on important conversations, networking, or social moments because I'm not outside with the smokers anymore?

You're not missing out, you're making space for something better. You can still go outside if you want to. You can invite people to walk with you or meet somewhere else. And if something is missed? That doesn't mean quitting wasn't worth it.

11 What if I start gaining weight when I quit?

Some people do, some don't. If you're snacking more, you can be mindful about it, but don't stress. Focus on quitting first. You can always shift other habits later.

12 What if quitting makes me feel worse before I feel better?

That's normal. Withdrawal symptoms are temporary, and your body is adjusting. You're healing, even if it's uncomfortable right now. Give it time. You'll feel the shift.

13 What if I'm not sure I really want to quit yet?

Then don't force it. Just keep getting curious. Try cutting back. Try noticing your habits. Try focusing on the benefits. Every bit of awareness brings you closer to the moment that will feel right.

Now, let's talk about those benefits.

and how to use them to stay grounded when things get hard.

Keep reading.



Make Room for What You Really Want

Replacing the habit is key — and that starts with noticing what's getting better.

Quitting doesn't stick when it feels like a loss. It sticks when you can actually feel what you're gaining, and when you use those gains as motivation to keep going.

You might not notice everything right away, and that's okay. The goal here isn't to feel perfect, it's to pay attention. When you can see, feel, or name the good that's showing up, you've got something real to hold onto when a craving hits.

Here are some things people often notice in the first few days or weeks:

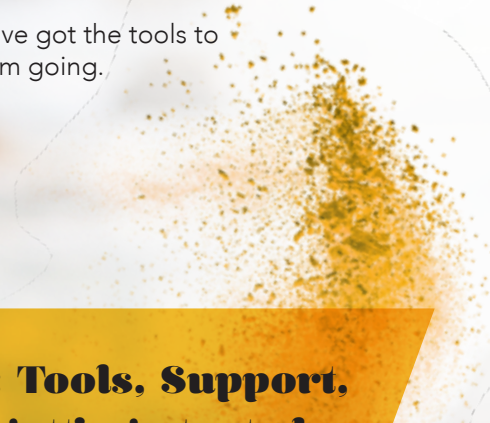
- Easier breathing like climbing stairs without getting winded, or waking up without coughing
- More energy like feeling less sluggish or tired as you move through your day
- Better sleep that could look like falling asleep faster, staying asleep longer, or waking up clearer
- Fewer signs of dehydration like less dry mouth or throat, or fewer nagging headaches
- Food tasting better, as in flavors and smells that feel richer or more noticeable
- More money when you realize at the end of the week or month that you've spent less and have more left over
- More mental space - you might not notice how much energy smoking or vaping takes until you're not doing it: the planning, the checking, the buying, the timing...it all adds up
- More wins to celebrate like every moment you skipped a cigarette, sat through a craving, or made it one more hour or day

You don't need to chase all of these. Pick two or three that matter to you. Write them down. Save them to your notes app. Think about them when cravings come up. Start routinely checking in with your body: Are you breathing easier? Is your energy better? Can you taste more? Did you skip that stop at the corner store this week?

When you can feel the benefits, it's easier to say no to the thing that takes them away.

**What you're gaining isn't abstract...it's real.
And it's yours.**

Let's make sure you've got the tools to keep that momentum going.



**Next: Tools, Support,
& getting started**



Tools and Support That Really Work

You don't have to tough it out. There's real help, and it actually works.

You don't have to do this alone, and you definitely don't have to figure it out from scratch. Whether you're looking for structure, support, or just a little help when cravings hit, there are proven tools designed to meet you where you are.

Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT)

NRT gives your body small, controlled amounts of nicotine, without the toxic chemicals found in cigarettes, vapes, or nicotine pouches. It helps ease withdrawal and reduce cravings while you work on breaking the habit itself.

- **Patches** – provide a steady dose all day
- **Gum or lozenges** – help with sudden cravings
- **Inhalers or nasal sprays** – fast-acting relief when things feel a little too intense

Some quitlines or local programs offer these for free. You can also find them over the counter at most pharmacies.

Prescription Medications

If NRT isn't the right fit, medications can also support your quit plan.

- **Bupropion** (Zyban/Wellbutrin) – helps reduce nicotine cravings and can support mood
- **Varenicline** (Chantix) – makes smoking or vaping feel less rewarding and triggers fewer positive brain chemicals, while easing withdrawal symptoms

Talk to a medical provider about what's safe and accessible for you.

Quitlines and Coaching

You don't need to know exactly what you need to reach out. Quitlines and coaches can help you set a plan, troubleshoot triggers, and stay accountable—without judgment.

- **Colorado Quitline** – 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669) or coquitline.org
- **This is Quitting** – Text "DITCHVAPE" to 88709 (ages 13–24)
- **My Life My Quit** – Text "Start My Quit" to 36072 (ages 12–17)
- **American Indian Quitline** – Call 855-5AI-QUIT
- **Baby & Me Tobacco Free** – Free counseling + diaper rewards for pregnant participants and their partners

Free Quit Apps

Apps can help you track your progress, interrupt cravings, and stay motivated day to day.

- **quitStart** – Tracks cravings, gives encouragement, shows health milestones
- **QuitGuide** – Helps manage triggers and cravings
- **Kwit** – Uses game-like features to help you stay engaged
- **QuitNow!** – Tracks health improvements, money saved, and offers community support
- **Escape the Vape** – Great for people using pod-based or disposable e-cigs
- **Smoking Log** – Stop Smoking – Ideal for tapering down and tracking daily changes

Harm Reduction Options

Not ready to quit completely? You can still:

- Cut back gradually
- Use NRT to space out smokes or vapes
- Set smoke- or vape-free zones
- Reduce your nicotine dose over time

**Every step
counts.
Progress
matters,
even when
it's messy**

Where to go From Here

You don't have to do everything today.
But you can do something.

If you've made it to the end of this guide, give yourself credit for that. Seriously. That alone is a step toward something better.

Maybe you're ready to quit. Maybe you're just thinking about it. Maybe you've tried before and you're starting to believe you could try again.

Wherever you are, this guide isn't just something to read once and forget. Come back to it. Revisit the sections that felt helpful. Focus on the benefits you want to hold onto. Use the tools. Ask for support. Take your time.

And when you're ready for the next step, Denver Element is here.

We belong to a collaborative with dedicated resources available for people in Colorado trying to quit smoking, and our collaborative offers:

- **Smoking cessation groups** so you don't have to go through this alone
- **1:1 coaching** tailored to your goals and your pace
- **Access to NRT and other tools** that can support your quit plan
- **Care that's culturally responsive** and actually sees you

Whether you want to schedule a call, join a group, or just ask a few questions, we'll meet you wherever you are.

You don't have to be perfect. You don't even have to be sure.

You just have to keep choosing yourself.



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