Smoking is one of the biggest causes of ill health and premature death in the UK, responsible for nearly one in five deaths. But it is never too late to stop – about five years after quitting, your risk of stroke and other smoking-related illnesses are greatly reduced. This factsheet explains how smoking increases the risk of stroke and describes the help and support available to help you to stop smoking.

Around a quarter of adults in the UK are dependent upon their smoking habit. Each year around 114,000 smokers die as a result of their habit. The majority of these deaths are due to lung cancer and other chest diseases, such as bronchitis and emphysema, but smoking also significantly increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.

**How smoking causes strokes**

As well as nicotine (the chemical that makes smoking so addictive) tobacco smoke contains over 4,000 toxic chemicals which are deposited on the lungs or absorbed into the bloodstream. These include carbon monoxide, arsenic, formaldehyde and cyanide.

Some of these damage blood vessel walls, leading to atherosclerosis (narrowing and furring of the arteries). This increases the chances of blood clots forming in the arteries to the brain and heart.

Smoking increases the stickiness of special blood cells called platelets, further increasing the risk of blood clots forming.

Smoking also increases the risk of high blood pressure – the single biggest risk factor for stroke.

People who smoke are up to three times more likely to have a stroke than those who don’t. The more you smoke, the greater your risk. Smoking is particularly dangerous for people who have high blood pressure. They are five times more likely to have a stroke than smokers with normal blood pressure, and 20 times than non-smokers with normal blood pressure.

Second hand smoke – breathing in someone else’s smoke – is also hazardous. Recent research suggests second hand smokers were nearly twice as likely to have a stroke as those who did not live or work in a smoky atmosphere.

**Benefits of not smoking**

It is never too late to stop smoking, regardless of how old you are, how much you smoke or how long you have smoked.
Stopping smoking reduces the risk of developing many fatal diseases including many types of cancer.

After one year your risk of a heart attack is half that of a smoker, after five years, it is similar to that of a non-smoker. Two years after stopping, the risk of stroke is significantly reduced.

**Help to stop smoking**

More help than ever before is available if you want to stop smoking. This includes special NHS clinics, a range of organisations, nicotine replacement products and medication. Not all smokers are the same so find out what works best for you.

Because nicotine is so addictive, and the smoking habit becomes so automatic, many people need support to help them stop smoking and research shows you are four times more likely to succeed at stopping if you have support.

It is normal for people to make more than one attempt before they stop smoking and stay stopped, so don’t be disheartened if you have tried to quit before and didn’t manage it at that time.

Stopping smoking can result in a number of withdrawal symptoms. These can include cravings, restlessness, irritability, depression, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbance or increased appetite. All these symptoms are temporary and will usually all disappear within a few weeks. Many people are concerned about gaining weight if they give up smoking. If this happens, the amount of weight gained is usually relatively small, and the risks associated with still smoking are much greater than that of any increase in weight. Also some of the nicotine replacement products available can reduce the chances of gaining weight.

**Smoking cessation clinics**

You can find out about smoking cessation clinics in your area through your Yellow Pages or by contacting the NHS Smoking Helpline or the Quitline (see useful contacts below). Your doctor’s surgery may also run a group for people who want to give up. At clinics and group meetings, you will not only receive information about giving up smoking and cessation aids, you will also have the valuable mutual help and support of others in the same situation. Many groups have carbon monoxide monitors so members can track how this poison leaves their bodies.

If you find it difficult to attend clinics or group meetings, you can still benefit from the advice and information packs that are available from various organisations and the NHS. Ask at your doctor’s surgery or contact one of the organisations listed at the end of this factsheet.

These materials will encourage you to draw up your own personal plan for giving up smoking. One of the most recent developments is the NHS Together Programme – a support programme designed to offer practical help and advice for people giving up smoking. To register, simply decide on your stop date, then contact the NHS Smoking Helpline.
Specialist trained advisors are available in many areas through the NHS. They can provide:

- one to one support
- help in making a personalised quit plan
- ongoing support and encouragement as you work through your lifestyle change
- relaxation and stress management techniques
- advice on habit-breaking, healthy eating and exercise.

Again, contact the NHS Smoking Helpline for information.

Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT)

Nicotine is the chemical that provides smokers with the ‘hit’ from their cigarettes. NRT replaces some of the nicotine you would normally get from cigarettes, helping to relieve withdrawal symptoms, such as cravings, restlessness, irritability and depression. You slowly reduce the dose over a period of time, until you do not use NRT at all. A wide range of NRT products are available from your pharmacist without a prescription, including:

- **Patches** – these offer a continuous supply of nicotine and are most suitable for people who want to feel constantly protected from cravings.
- **Gum** – helps to control cravings at the time you feel the urge to smoke.
- **Lozenges** – an alternative to the gum.
- **Nasal sprays** – good for people who were heavy smokers or who get severe withdrawal symptoms.
- **Inhalator** – helpful if you crave nicotine and miss the physical action of smoking.
- **Tablets** – dissolve under your tongue.

Products come in a range of doses and pack sizes. Treatment lasts for up to three months and it is important to complete the course.

You can get a range of nicotine replacement products on prescription. Speak to your doctor, who can help determine the type of NRT that would be most suitable for you. Research has shown that people who use NRT can double their chances of successfully stopping smoking, especially if they also go to smoking cessation clinics.

Please note, NRT may not be suitable for all people who have had a stroke. NRT should be started under medical supervision in someone who has had a recent stroke. It is important to realise that the risk of continuing to smoke is far greater than the risk of using NRT after a stroke.

**Champix**

Champix is a non-nicotinic medication that reduces cravings and withdrawal symptoms, and reduces the satisfaction gained from smoking. You start to take the tablets whilst still smoking and set a quit date after 1–2 weeks. It is only available on prescription, and treatment lasts for about three months. It may not be suitable if you have kidney problems, depression or
epilepsy, talk to your doctor for further advice. If you are prescribed Champix, you will also be offered motivational support from the Life Rewards programme.

Zyban
Zyban is a tablet available on prescription which is taken twice a day for about eight weeks. It works on neurotransmitters in the brain to reduce nicotine cravings and withdrawal reactions; it does not replace the nicotine normally consumed in cigarettes. It is most suitable for those who are highly motivated to quit smoking and it can double the chances of stopping.

Zyban is not suitable for everyone, particularly those with a history of seizures or those with conditions associated with increased risk of seizures. This means that Zyban is not usually recommended for someone with a history of stroke. Zyban is also not suitable for people taking certain medications – including some over the counter medicines. Speak to your doctor for advice. If you are prescribed Zyban, you will also be registered on the Right Time programme for motivational support.

Other aids
There are many self-help books on the market to help you stop smoking. A variety of herbal and other products are available, but it is not clear how useful they are. There is now some preliminary evidence that glucose tablets may help reduce cravings and help people stop smoking. Some people have found acupuncture or hypnotherapy helpful in giving up smoking. Make sure you see a qualified practitioner if you want to try these therapies.

Useful organisations
All organisations are UK wide unless otherwise stated.

NHS Smoking Helpline
England
Tel: 0800 022 4332
Northern Ireland
Tel: 0800 85 85 85
Scotland
Tel: 0800 84 84 84
Wales
Tel: 0800 1690 169
Open 7 days a week, 7am–11pm
Website (general): www.smokefree.nhs.uk
Website (Scotland): www.canstopsmoking.com

- One-to-one confidential advice from specially trained counselors.
- Guidance on stopping smoking and help with associated problems.
- Information leaflets on how to get started, planning and preparing to quit smoking.
- Guidance on accessing support from local smoking cessation services.

The NHS also provides helpline advice on stopping smoking in several Asian languages, and specific support for pregnant women – contact the NHS Smoking Helpline for more information.
Quit
Quitline: 0800 00 22 00
Open 7 days a week, 9am–9pm
Email: stopsmoking@quit.org.uk
Website: www.quit.org.uk
Independent charity offering information, personalised support and help from trained counsellors. Has online resources to help you develop a quit plan.

Action on Smoking and Health (ASH)
First Floor 144-145 Shoreditch High Street
London E1 6JE
Tel: 020 7739 5902
Website: www.ash.org.uk

ASH Scotland
8 Frederick Street Edinburgh EH2 2HB
Tel. 0131 225 4725
Email: ashscotland@ashscotland.org.uk
Website: www.ashscotland.org.uk

Ash Wales
2nd Floor 8 Museum Place,
Cardiff CF10 3BG
Tel: 029 2064 1101
Website: www.ashwales.co.uk
ASH is a campaigning public health charity working to eliminate the harm caused by tobacco.

Stop Smoking Wales
Tel: 0800 085 2219
Website: www.wales.nhs.uk
Provides information on local stop smoking services and support groups. Specially trained staff can offer guidance, advice on how to quit, information on NRT as well as free access to one-to-one counseling and group therapy.

No Smoking Day
59 Redchurch Street
London E2 7DJ
Tel: 020 7739 5110
Website: www.nosmokingday.org.uk
Charity which organises the No Smoking Day on the second Wednesday of March each year.

Tobacco Information Scotland
Website: www.tobaccoinscotland.org.uk
An online gateway to smoking and tobacco-related information in Scotland.