

Adherence to and Reasons for Premature Discontinuation From Stop-Smoking Medications: Data From the ITC Four-Country Survey

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Abstract

Introduction: Nicotine replacement therapies (NRTs) have been demonstrated to be effective in clinical trials but may have lower efficacy when purchased over-the-counter (OTC). Premature discontinuation and insufficient dosing have been offered as possible explanations. The aims are to (a) investigate the prevalence of and reasons for premature discontinuation of stop-smoking medications (including prescription only) and (b) how these differ by type, duration of use, and source (prescription or OTC).

Methods: The sample includes 1,219 smokers or recent quitters who had used medication in the last year (80.5% NRT, 19.5% prescription only). Data were from Waves 5 and 6 of the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four-Country Survey.

Results: Most of the sample (69.1%) discontinued medication use prematurely. This was more common among NRT users (71.4%) than in users of bupropion and varenicline (59.6%). OTC NRT users were particularly likely to discontinue (76.3%). Relapse back to smoking was the most common reason for discontinuation of medication reported by 41.6% of respondents. Side effects (18.3%) and believing that the medication was no longer needed (17.1%) were also commonly reported. Of those who completed treatment, 37.9% achieved 6-month continuous abstinence compared with 15.6% who discontinued prematurely. Notably, 65.6% who discontinued because they believed the medication had worked were abstinent.

Conclusions: Premature discontinuation of stop-smoking medications is common but is not a plausible reason for poorer quit outcomes for most people. Encouraging persistence of medication use after relapse or in the face of minor side effects may help increase long-term cessation outcomes.

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