



LAWYER ANANT Jain had given up smoking for over two years. Some initial discomfort notwithstanding, he managed rather well. But then at a friend's party one day he decided to smoke just one cigarette. "I wasn't feeling very bright and decided to light up with a friend. It relaxed me. And then it just started all over again," says Jain.

How did that happen? After all, if you've given up for so long, why should just one cigarette get you back into the habit? Also, isn't it within the first three to six months of quitting that most relapses happen?

A LIFELONG FIGHT

No, say experts. "A gap of a year or more is enough to kill any physical or even mental cravings for nicotine," explains Dr Vikram Jaggi, medical director, chest and asthma center, Delhi. "But it is also enough time for the ex-smoker to let his or her guard down. In that year, the person tends to become confident and feels he or she will not relapse. So a single puff or cigarette will not really make a difference, they think. But it actually does - if the person takes a puff at that time, the habit could easily come back and along with it, the addiction too." People who want to successfully kick the habit should stay cautious all through, say experts. "The trick is not to let one's defences down at all. At least in the case of smoking," adds Dr Jaggi.

READY FOR WITHDRAWAL?

Quitting smoking anyway is not the easiest thing in the world. While many people may believe they can quit as and when they like, that is not really true.

"The addiction to nicotine

becomes a biological and psychological need. Any attempt to break the habit leads to withdrawal symptoms that become difficult to handle," says Dr Sandeep Buddhiraja, head, internal medicine, Max Healthcare, Delhi.

Mood swings, irritability, aggression, depression, restlessness, sleep disturbances, constipation, increased appetite or the strong urge to smoke are what we call withdrawal symptoms. "The first three to six months after quitting are the most crucial as there is every possible chance of a relapse. More than 95 per cent of those trying to quit smoking fall off the wagon during this time," says Dr Buddhiraja.

Also, quitting has to be a slow process. "Sudden deprivation is not healthy either. The needs to be a conscious effort to reduce the addiction slowly. You can't go cold turkey," says Dr Jaggi.

However, while the initial physical problems may cease to exist in some months, the temptation to stay away from cigarettes all your life is the real test. Many people who have successfully stayed off cigarettes for a year or even more fail to resist the temptation and have a relapse.

GIVE IT UP

FIRST SIX MONTHS:

- Keep chewing on gum
- Eat fruits or nuts to control hunger pangs
- Avoid being with or around people who smoke
- Drink lots of water

AFTER A YEAR OR MORE:

- Keep a strong grip on your emotions
- Do not let go of yourself as even one cigarette can trigger a relapse
- Divert your attention if you feel the need for a cigarette

MATTER OF HONOUR

So what is the solution? "Be very sure of yourself," explains Dr Jaggi. "Make the fact that you have given up smoking into an issue of pride. Tell people around you that you have given up. That way, the next time you want to light up, people will question your willpower and integrity." He adds, "Stop making excuses like 'I'm in a bad mood' or 'I'm depressed' to justify a smoke." But before anything else, give yourself a strong reason to stay away from cigarettes.

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