

Herbal support for tobacco cessation

1. Identify the reasons why there is a pattern of addictive tobacco use. There can be many reasons, and each help inform the best support plan. Here are some possibilities:

-Chemistry of the nervous system. Imbalances in neurotransmitters are often self-medicated with tobacco. They can range from dopamine imbalances as with mania and schizophrenia, to imbalances of serotonin pathways as with anxiety and depression, to imbalances in adenosine-based arousal pathways that can be associated with conditions diagnosed as “ADD”, for example.

-Endocrine and adrenal function. Many times tobacco becomes an essential tool for coping with stress, because it can help stimulate adrenal gland reserves and thus temporarily boost performance. Often coffee is used alongside.

-Digestive system disturbances, usually of a spasmodic, crampy nature. Nicotine helps relax gut musculature.

-Many psychological and social needs can be fulfilled with tobacco. For instance, many have argued that the act of smoking is a semi-shamanic act, connecting us to the unseen world and allowing us to tap into a source of creativity. Others discuss the oral component of tobacco use – cigarettes, specifically. Smoking or dipping as social phenomena are also common reasons.

2. Understand how nicotine affects the body:

-Brain cells (neurons) in the major reward pathways of the central nervous system rely on nicotinic receptors to transmit signals; tobacco activates these very powerfully.

-All brain chemistry is modulated by nicotine, which freely crosses the blood-brain barrier and affects many neurotransmitters (see above).

-Smooth muscle which lines the gut and bladder is powerfully affected by nicotine, again because of the nicotinic receptors present there. Generally, these tissues are relaxed by tobacco – although there can be a powerful, though short-lived, stimulatory effect too.

-Due to its constrictive role on blood vessels, cardiovascular disease can be aggravated by tobacco use.

-Due to its relaxant effect on lung muscles and excretion mechanisms, coupled with the residue of the smoke itself, smoking tobacco can harm lung tissue.

3. Formulate an individualized plan to help in the quitting process. This should take into account the specific “whys” and “hows” of the person’s constitution. Common to all programs should be:

-*Lobelia inflata*. This remarkable plant has an alkaloidal content similar to that of tobacco, but with no nicotine. Its effect is close enough to serve as an effective and powerful substitute during the initial withdrawal (which really only lasts 3-7 days). Lobelia can be part of a smoking blend (2 parts lobelia, 1 part mullein leaf, 1 part red clover flowers, with a pinch of peppermint for taste if desired). It can also be used as a tincture (1 part lobelia, 9 parts oat tops, taken at doses of 60-90 drops as needed but not more than 4 times in an hour).

-An herbal tea blend for nervine support, perhaps made with oat tops and skullcap. This will gently soothe and calm nerves, which helps in any case.

-Respiratory system support, usually in the form of mullein or elecampane extracts, is important as the lungs re-awaken from their tobacco-induced slumber.

Some specific ideas for specific constitutions:

-Manic conditions can benefit from short courses of *Rauwolfia serpentina*, an Ayurvedic herb with strongly calmative effects. It interacts powerfully with conventional medications, so its use should be supervised by a qualified herbalist or naturopath.

-Conditions of anxiety do well with a more powerful nervine such as kava-kava.

-Depressive conditions can benefit from St. Johnswort, as long as no other medications are currently being taken, and/or *Rhodiola rosea*.

Overstimulated / “ADD” conditions seem to respond well to ginkgo extract, and tea blends that feature hawthorn and linden.

-Adrenal deficiency and fatigued constitutions that rely on tobacco for “fire” and motivation will benefit from licorice and *Rhodiola rosea*.

-Digestive function can be balanced in two ways: if constipation is an issue, yellowdock is an excellent solution. Digestive antispasmodics such as chamomile, crampbark, and enteric-coated peppermint oils can help calm a crampy gut and remove one of the reasons for using tobacco in the first place.

-Finally, smoking blends can serve multiple functions: they allow for a reflective break from the day, continuing to nurture the shamanic spirit and fostering the creative process; they help control the oral urges that can push some to smoke; and they can allow for a continued social interaction. Gradually, the amount of lobelia in the blend can be decreased, slowly weaning the brain’s reward pathways off the powerful alkaloids. Finally, a transition can be made from smoking blend to lobelia/oats tincture (see above). Eventually, even this can be withdrawn.