

Predictors of smoking relapse by duration of abstinence: findings from the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four Country Survey

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Abstract

Aim To explore predictors of smoking relapse and how predictors vary according to duration of abstinence.

Design, setting and participants A longitudinal survey of 1296 ex-smokers recruited as part of the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four Country Survey (Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and United States).

Measurements Quitters were interviewed by telephone at varying durations of abstinence (from 1 day to approximately 3 years) and then followed-up approximately 1 year later. Theorized predictors of relapse (i.e. urges to smoke; outcome expectancies of smoking and quitting; and abstinence self-efficacy) and nicotine dependence were measured in the survey.

Findings Relapse was associated with lower abstinence self-efficacy and a higher frequency of urges to smoke, but only after the first month or so of quitting. Both these measures mediated relationships between perceived benefits of smoking and relapse. Perceived costs of smoking and benefits of quitting were unrelated to relapse.

Conclusions Challenging perceived benefits of smoking may be an effective way to increase abstinence self-efficacy and reduce frequency of urges to smoke (particularly after the initial weeks of quitting), in order to reduce subsequent relapse risk.

Keywords Cessation, outcome expectancies, relapse, self-efficacy, smoking, tobacco, urges.

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