# Be a Quitter

This free online program helps HIV-positive smokers kick the habit.

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Quitting cigarettes is a challenge for any smoker, but it can be especially tough for those living with HIV. That's because the HIV population sees higher rates of depression, anxiety and substance abuse—psychiatric issues that can make kicking the habit all the more challenging. But quitting is possible, and it just got easier, thanks to Jonathan Shuter, MD, and his team at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. They developed a free online program called Positively Smoke Free (PositivelySmokeFreeMe.com) specifically for smokers living with HIV.

Based on the team's successful eight-week group therapy sessions, the online program "covers topics like pharmacotherapy, assertiveness training and anticipating stressful situations," Shuter says. "But it's distilled into bite-size themes and incorporates videos and links to an online community—that's the exciting part! You can interact with others in the community trying to deal with these issues." What's more, the upgraded program is fully accessible on smartphones.

Smoking is particularly unhealthy for people living with HIV, even those with undetectable viral loads and high CD4 counts, Shuter explains, because the virus causes a high level of inflammation and predisposes people to cardiovascular disease and cancers. "If you throw smoking on top of that, it's a recipe for disaster."

A misperception Shuter often comes across is that smoking is a minor vice, particularly if it's just a few cigarettes a day. "It's great to cut down," he notes, "but there is no level of smoking that's safe and acceptable."

But Positively Smoke Free takes care not to dwell on the negative aspects. "Many of our patients have their HIV under control with meds, and they've overcome other addictions," Shuter says. "We try to get them to think of their track record of success in overcoming health challenges. This is just one more they can overcome."

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