

Scientists say text messages can help smokers quit

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An international team of researchers led by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) in the United Kingdom has discovered that mobile phones can help smokers give up their biggest vice. How? Supportive and encouraging messages sent via mobile phone texts have succeeded in helping twice the number of smokers quit the

habit at six months, as compared to the control group in the trial. Presented in The Lancet journal, the findings of TXT2STOP show how text messaging is an innovative and effective approach to help smokers.

The Medical Research Council (MRC) in the United Kingdom says that over 5 million people die from smoking each year. While people recognise and acknowledge the damage that smoking does to one's health and body, only two out of three people are willing to butt out their habit for good.

To assess the success of using text messaging to help smokers quit, the researchers evaluated 5 800 subjects in the TXT2STOP trial. Specifically, they examined the long-term effects of specially designed text messages by testing the levels of cotinine (a chemical found in tobacco) found in the subjects' saliva after they said they had stopped smoking for six months.

The subjects were randomly allocated to one of two groups: trial or control. The former group was sent 5 text messages each day for an initial 5-week period, and then 3 text messages each week for the next 26 weeks. In the latter period, the

participants received messages via a personalised system, enabling instant messages at times of need by texting the word 'crave' or 'lapse'.

Professionals who help smokers quit as well as smokers themselves contributed to the development of messages that encouraged the subjects to persevere and to focus on their success to date. Messages like 'Cravings last less than five minutes on average. To help distract yourself, try sipping a drink slowly until the craving is over', and 'This is it! - QUIT DAY, throw away all your fags. TODAY is the start of being QUIT forever, you can do it!', are examples.

Subjects in the control group received text messages every 14 days thanking them for participating in the trial. The findings indicate that continuous abstinence (corroborated by chemical tests) at 6 months was significantly increased in the TXT2STOP group - 10.7 % success compared with 4.9 % success of the control group. The researchers say the trial worked well for all ages and across all social groups. 'Mobile-phone text-messaging smoking-cessation support doubles quit rates at six months,' the authors write.

Commenting on the results of the study, LSHTM's Dr Caroline Free, who led the research, says: 'Text messages are a very convenient way for smokers to receive support to quit. People described TXT2STOP as being like having a "friend" encouraging them or an "angel on their shoulder". It helped people resist the temptation to smoke.'

For his part, MRC's Professor Max Parmar says: 'Smoking kills more than 5 million people each year, and 2 out of every 3 smokers have said at some point that they would like to give up. By carrying out a large-scale trial like this to see whether text messages can help people truly free themselves of their addiction, this research has shown that texting could be a powerful tool to help people to walk away from cigarettes for good. The MRC has been tackling the problem of smoking for over half a century, and we're committed to funding research that has the potential to change so many people's lives.'

Experts from the University of Auckland in New Zealand and the George Institute for Global Health, University of Sydney in Australia contributed to this study. For more information, please visit:

London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM):
<http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/> 

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