

What do we know about the success of using incentives to reduce smoking?

What is an incentive to reduce smoking?

An incentive is a payment or reward of some type that can be used to encourage people to quit smoking. It could be cash, a voucher, a gift, or a prize as part of a contest. Incentives are already used successfully to encourage a number of health behaviours; for example, the Maternity Immunisation Allowance payment is made to encourage parents to immunise their children.

Do incentives work to reduce smoking?

Smoking is a very difficult behaviour to change because it is so addictive, and incentive payments may not work for many smokers. Studies have shown that giving smokers incentives to quit may be successful at getting them to quit at first. But once the rewards are no longer available, they are just as likely to relapse as smokers who did not get the incentive^{1,2}. Because of addiction, incentive payments may not work in the long term unless smokers are very motivated to quit themselves anyway.

A review of using incentives to change health behaviours has found that using them is more likely to work if the incentive is³:

- ✧ used to change behaviours that are simple, time limited and for one-off goals;
- ✧ part of a program that uses several approaches to address different aspects of the issue;
- ✧ a large amount or value;

- ✧ given immediately (instead of sending it to them later), and is given often (not just one-off);
- ✧ also given to reward people in the smoker's social network who support them; and
- ✧ used in a program that also builds people's skills and confidence.

Any program that is planning to use incentives should keep in mind these points.

Using incentives to help pregnant women to stop smoking

Incentives have been used successfully in programs that encourage women to quit smoking during pregnancy. This has probably been successful because the main aim is to stop smoking for a relatively short time – that is, during the 9 to 12 months of pregnancy and after the birth. These programs have used incentives as part of a structured social support program, and have also given incentives to the woman's partner to encourage them to quit as well^{4,5}.

Using incentives to encourage young people not to start smoking

It is possible that incentives could be useful to encourage young people not to start smoking, but this has not been studied. One program in Canada, for example, supports young people with a LifeSkills Program and rewards them if they graduate from high school and stay smoke free, but it is not known if this is successful or not⁶.



References

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