Attempts to Quit Smoking and Relapse: Factors Associated with Success or Failure from the ATTEMPT Cohort Study


Smoking cessation is a dynamic process that often involves a sequence of unsuccessful attempts to quit before achieving long-term abstinence. Although a significant number of smokers express a desire to quit, only about one-third actually attempt to quit each year, and few are successful. Approximately 75% to 80% of smokers who attempt to quit relapse before 6 months of abstinence. Of those remaining, relapses may occur years after a smoker initially quits.

The objective of this study was to identify predictors of attempts to stop smoking and predictors of relapse. This study included 2,431 smokers from preexisting Internet panels in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Spain. These panel members are Internet users who have registered voluntarily and agreed to participate in various online research studies. Respondents were aged 35 to 65, smoked more than five cigarettes per day, and intended to stop smoking in the next 3 months. We followed panel members every 3 months for up to 18 months through Internet contact on measures relating to quit attempts, smoking status, motivation to quit, nicotine cue, weight and weight concern, health-related factors, withdrawal symptoms, and smoking cessation aids.

In this study, recent quit attempts strongly predicted future attempts, but also predicted subsequent relapse. Motivation to quit was predictive of future attempts but not of relapse/abstinence following the attempts. Relapse to smoking was associated with nicotine dependence, exposure to smoking cues, craving, withdrawal symptoms, and lack of smoking cessation aids. The findings lend support to a model of cessation in which the level of motivation to stop generates quit attempts but plays little role in relapse. Dependence, social smoking cues, and a recently failed quit attempt are important factors in relapse.

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