

## Striving for a Smoke-Free Life

The Great American Smokeout rolls around every year during the third week of November and it has helped millions of people quit since it started in the early 1970s. The idea is not necessarily to make people stop cold turkey on that day, but rather to have tobacco users begin to think about quitting or to start the process if they plan to make it their quit date.

The campaign is important because according to the American Cancer Society, smoking causes more than 480,000 deaths every year, or about one in five deaths. More than 16 million Americans live with a smoking-related disease.

Dr. Jesse VanLe, a cardiothoracic surgeon for OSF Cardiovascular Institute in Bloomington, Illinois, is a strong supporter of the Great American Smokeout, which will be **Thursday, November 18**.

Smoking harms almost every tissue and organ in the body, including your heart and blood vessels. Nicotine, one of the main chemicals in cigarettes, causes your heart to beat faster and your blood pressure to rise. Carbon monoxide from smoking also gets into the blood and robs your body of oxygen.

According to Dr. VanLe, those who smoke have good reason to worry about its effect on their health.

“The World Health Organization has estimated that the number of cardiovascular associated events is approximately 17 to 18 million per year attributed to smoking,” he says. “A person who is 40 years old who smokes, they’ll have approximately nine years taken off their life by the time they reach 60 to 70. Nine years, which is a lot.”

Despite the data, quitting isn’t easy for most smokers. According to research offered by the Illinois Quitline, it can take the average person five to seven times before they quit for good. Dr. VanLe says it is important not to get discouraged, and suggests surrounding yourself with supportive family and friends and changing habits that can trigger the urge to smoke.

“The population that has the most success would be the one not exposing themselves to the advertisements: other people who smoke for example, not visiting the bar anymore, or they have a very strong family system that helps them out and encourages them to quit. At first it is very difficult, but if you can do it after six months, with strong family support, and change the environment, then you’ll be more successful,” says Dr. VanLe.

Over time people who quit smoking see many benefits to their health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), some benefits of quitting even start immediately after that last cigarette. Within minutes a person’s heart rate will drop, in 24 hours the nicotine level in the blood drops to zero, and in a matter of days the carbon monoxide level in the blood drops to a level of someone who does not smoke.

“Some process takes longer than others but we know the chemicals and everything can be reversed within five years. And that’s a tremendous amount of reversal in terms of coronary occlusive disease that you can do. So let’s start from day one. You can measure the difference,” encourages Dr. VanLe.

[Here are some good guidelines](#) for what kind of nicotine replacement therapy you might want to try to address the physical addiction. Along with counseling, the Illinois Tobacco Quitline offers up to six weeks of free nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) to enrolled clients who qualify.

As for using e-cigarettes to quit smoking, Dr. VanLe says there isn’t enough research to know the long-term, potential harmful impact. He also points out the Federal Food and Drug Administration hasn’t approved the devices as a smoking cessation tool because of the lack of research connected with their use.

The Illinois Tobacco Quitline is **1-866-QUIT-YES**. It can offer a variety of support and helpful tools. You can also [find an OSF HealthCare behavioral therapist or doctor](#) who can help you quit smoking or end smokeless tobacco use.