

At the beginning of a new year, many Americans try to get healthy and kick bad habits. To quit smoking should be at the top of the list.

Cigarette smoking kills about 178,000 women each year in the U.S. Smoking shaves an average of 14.5 years off the lives of female smokers, yet nearly one in six women 18 and older still light up.

Each puff of cigarette smoke exposes users to 2,500 chemicals and cancer-causing agents.

Smoking causes 87 percent of lung cancer deaths and increases the risk of other cancers. Smokers are more likely to experience heart attack, stroke, emphysema, bronchitis, osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis, cataracts, and infertility than nonsmokers are.

Pregnant women who smoke put their babies at a higher risk for low birth weight, sudden infant death syndrome, poor lung function, asthma, and bronchitis. The harmful chemicals in cigarettes also pass through breast milk to babies.

Smokers who quit can stop or reverse the damage caused by cigarettes. In the days and months after quitting, heart rate and blood pressure drop to healthier levels, and breathing, circulation, and sense of smell and taste may improve.

Heart attack risk decreases by 50 percent within the first year after quitting, and the chances of developing lung cancer, heart disease, and other ailments fall to nearly that of a nonsmoker in the first few years.

Talk to a doctor about methods that may help. Nicotine replacement products can help satisfy urges.

It takes most smokers several tries to quit for good. If the first attempt is not successful, get some help and get back on track.