

Ex-smokers say new drug will make you kick butts for good

by Pam_Adams

How much does former smoker Donna Patrick believe in the new stop-smoking prescription drug, Chantix?

"I like it so much, I bought 100 shares of Pfizer," she says. "I really think I'm going to reap from the benefits."

STOP SMOKING - A new drug will make you kick butts for good. CNS Illustration by Anthony Michael Noel.

Patrick hasn't smoked since January, which may be benefit enough. But Pfizer Inc., the pharmaceutical company, ought to be paying Patrick instead of the doctor who prescribed it for her. She has enlisted 10 or 12 others to take Chantix pills.

Patrick, a social worker at Methodist Medical Center in Peoria, Ill., smoked about a half pack of cigarettes a day, on and off for 35 years. One of her recruits, nurse Barbara Kelly, smoked a pack and a half a day for 40 years. She hasn't had a cigarette in three months.

Both women have tried nicotine patches unsuccessfully. Kelly also has tried Zyban, another prescription smoking-cessation drug. With Chantix, they say they haven't experienced cravings, withdrawal pangs or much in the way of side effects. In fact, neither one can stomach the smell of cigarette smoke.

"You really notice the smell," Kelly says. "To be honest, I can't believe I leaned over sick people smelling like an ashtray. I can't believe I did that to people."

Chantix, the first stop-smoking drug of its kind, entered the market with a splash. Its success rates were high enough that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration put it on the fast track for approval. Television commercials came out featuring people talking about "my time to quit," but not the product.

The timing was excellent for employees of Methodist Medical Center who smoke. In March, Peoria-area hospitals announced plans to ban smoking on their grounds by July 4 of this year - one reason it's been easy for Patrick to convince colleagues to try the drug. But they're not the only ones interested.

"We've gotten a number of calls about it," says Linda Preckwinkle, who manages the American Lung Association's quit-smoking line out of Springfield, Ill. The line, funded by proceeds from the state attorney general's lawsuit against tobacco companies, provides basic stop-smoking counseling services.

But there are those who are leery about Chantix, its success rates as a stop-smoking aid and its side effects.

"There are still so many unknowns," says John Polito of South Carolina, an ex-smoker who advocates quitting cold turkey through his Web site, whyquit.com.

"If you go back and look at the gum, the patch, Zyban, there was tremendous excitement when they first came out, too."

Unlike Zyban - also known as the antidepressant Wellbutrin - or nicotine patches and gums, Chantix goes straight to the brain and blocks the receptors that produce physical cravings for nicotine. Soon after smokers start the initial 12-week regimen, many say they lose the desire to smoke. Like Patrick and Kelly, they say they can't stand the taste or smell of tobacco products. A second 12-week regimen is prescribed for successful quitters to boost the drug's effectiveness.

Doctors recommend smokers continue smoking one cigarette a day for the first week after they start taking the drug.

"It got to the point I had to force myself to smoke that last day because it tasted so horrible," Patrick says.

In clinical trials, the most common side effects include mild nausea, headaches, vomiting and vivid dreams.

"About 3 percent of people have to stop taking the drug because of severe nausea," says Dr. Michael Peil, a Peoria pulmonologist, "But most can get by that by taking it with food or cutting the dosage."

Peil states up front that he's a paid speaker for Pfizer, makers of Chantix. But he's more measured in his responses about the drug than Patrick, who got her prescription from him.

He says he has seen success with people who haven't been able to stop smoking using other smoking-cessation aids. But he's also seen people who aren't able to quit smoking the first time around.

"As with any drug, there's going to be failures."

Less than half - 44 percent - of Chantix users completely abstained from tobacco after three months. The percentage dropped to 22 percent after one year, according to the results of several clinical trials.

Still, those quit rates create excitement in the low-success arena of smoking cessation.

"In the past, if you got a 7 to 10 percent success rate at the end of a year, you were doing good," Peil says.

He and Preckwinkle emphasize that Chantix is not a magic pill. It can help reduce the physical addiction to nicotine, but newly-quit smokers need additional help dealing with the psychological addiction to nicotine.

Doctors, smoking-cessation counselors, even Pfizer, recommend using Chantix or nicotine replacement therapies in combination with counseling, support groups or other resources designed to help recovering smokers change habits associated with smoking.

Peil tells patients not to consider themselves failures if they fall off the wagon.

"It can take up to 10 attempts to quit smoking successfully," he says. Even using a Chantix pill.

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Freedom from Smoking Online, a seven-step, self-paced program: www.ffsonline.org.

For more information about Chantix, go to Pfizer Web sites www.mytimetoquit.com or www.chantix.com, or call 877-242-6849.

Visit whyquit.com, an online newsletter and support group dedicated to helping smokers quit cold turkey.

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