



## *Helping People with Co-Occurring Behavioral Health and Tobacco Use Disorders during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

COVID-19 attacks the lungs and is an especially serious threat to those who smoke tobacco, vape or use e-cigarettes. This is an important time to help people manage cravings and maintain temporary abstinence from tobacco products in order to stay safe and stay inside. Below are some tips for working with people who smoke or vape during the COVID-19 pandemic:

### **Areas to address in the initial conversation:**

- Re-engage with the message that you would like to ask about their well-being during the COVID-19 crisis
- Inquire about their health and any needs they might have
- Review who is in their support network

### **Review your agency's COVID-19 safety protocol or follow the [CDC protocol](#) (check the site regularly for updates)**

- Recommend that they wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (a good measure of 20 seconds is singing happy birthday twice) before and after smoking or vaping. If they can't wash their hands, they should use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol alcohol
- Ask whether they have access to masks and gloves. If they don't have, check with your program for available resources you can offer
- Recommend avoiding close contact with others, including people who might not have any symptoms
- Recommend that they cover their cough and sneeze with tissue and throw it immediately away in a lined trash can. If they don't have a tissue, they can cough into the bend in their elbow. Wash hands with soap and water afterwards
- Encourage them not to touch their eyes, nose, and mouth
- If they are helping someone who is sick, they should wear gloves and CDC-approved mask (check website for current guidance) to minimize the risk of contact with bodily fluids. Recommend washing their hands before putting on gloves and after taking them off

### **Using a harm reduction approach, discuss tobacco use and vaping:**

- With permission, ask about their tobacco use and vaping (see the [Self Report Tobacco Assessment](#))
- Ask if they are still using tobacco or vaping; ask how and where they are getting tobacco and vaping products
- With permission, share with them that because COVID-19 attacks the lungs, it is an especially serious threat to those who smoke tobacco or who use any combustible tobacco products – pipes, cigarettes, cigars, etc. – or to those who vape.
- Because secondhand smoke travels through environments and increases the risk of complications of COVID-19, encourage people to smoke or vape outdoors or in well-ventilated areas (if they continue to smoke or vape)

- If someone cuts back or stops using tobacco or vaping, ask about any withdrawal symptoms (e.g., anxiety, restlessness, sad or depressed mood, agitation and anger, insomnia, feeling hungry, craving nicotine)
- Frame the conversation as temporary abstinence. Let them know that even if they aren't interested in quitting, there are medications including nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) that can help reduce cravings and withdrawal and help them stay safe indoors. Assist them with obtaining prescriptions and prescription deliveries for these medications. Let them know that the New York State Smokers' Quitline may be able to send them some NRT to get started (866-697-8487 or 866-NY QUITs)
- Here are some educational handouts you can use to discuss the medication options:
  - [Varenicline Educational Handout](#)
  - [Bupropion Education Handout](#)
  - Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) Educational Handouts: [Patch](#), [Gum](#), [Lozenge](#), [Nasal Spray](#), [Inhaler](#)

**If the person is not interested in temporary abstinence at this time, talk to them about ways to minimize their risk of COVID-19 while using tobacco or vape products:**

- Revisit the benefits of medication (including NRT) for temporary abstinence or reducing cravings with every conversation
- Encourage the person not to share their own tobacco and vaping products in order to minimize contact with others. Remind them to not share e-cigs/cigarettes, cigars, pipes, bongs, lighters, and other paraphernalia. If they have to share, they can reduce the potential for harm by wiping down the mouthpieces with an alcohol swab before sharing or using separate mouthpieces
- If they are smoking with others nearby, tell them to maintain a distance of at least six feet
- Encourage them to limit trips into the community to purchase tobacco and/or vaping products
- Encourage them to avoid picking up and smoking partially-smoked cigarettes

**Talking about avoiding returns to use**

- Affirm any attempts or effort to cut back or abstain from tobacco or vaping
- Acknowledge that during this period of prolonged stress people may experience increased cravings and triggers to use tobacco or vape
- Assess person for risk of return to use
  - Go over relapse prevention plan (it can be helpful to write it down)
  - Identify triggers and high-risk situations
  - Plan for lapses
  - Plan for reaching out to recovering, safe friend or family members
  - Practice replacing negative thoughts with positive thoughts
  - Teach [loving-kindness meditation](#)
  - List emergency phone numbers

**References and Resources**

1. <http://nyctcttac.org/>
2. <https://harmreduction.org/miscellaneous/covid-19-guidance-for-people-who-use-drugs-and-harm-reduction-programs/>
3. <https://harmreduction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID19-safer-drug-use-1.pdf>
4. <https://www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus>
5. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/03/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>

Contact [info@nyctcttac.org](mailto:info@nyctcttac.org) for more information.