

Smokers motivated to 'quit for COVID' to ease burden on health system

30 March 2021



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An international survey that included 600 smokers in the UK has found that cessation messaging focused on easing the burden on our health system is most effective in encouraging people to quit.

The research, which was conducted in April-May 2020, randomly assigned participants to view one of four quit smoking messages, two of which explicitly referenced [health implications](#) and COVID-19, one referred more vaguely to risk of chest infection, and one highlighted financial motivations for quitting.

"We wanted to explore the effectiveness of smoking cessation messaging at a time when [health systems](#) the world over are beleaguered, and all our lives have had to pivot into pandemic-response mode," said Professor Simone Pettigrew (Head of Food Policy at The George Institute for Global Health), who led the research.

All four messages were effective in terms of increasing participants' intentions to quit within a fortnight and prompting them to seek additional

information around COVID-19 risk, with the two messages that specifically mentioned COVID-19 the most impactful:

MESSAGE A. By quitting now, you can reduce your chances of experiencing complications from the coronavirus if you become infected. This will help our overstretched [health services](#) to cope with the huge increase in patients.

MESSAGE B. Quit now—it's never too late. Smoking damages your lungs so they don't work as well. This means smokers are more likely to have severe complications if infected by the coronavirus.

Message A (referring to both personal consequences and to the impact on the functioning of the health system) landed best with participants, 34% of whom reported intention to quit and 44% sought additional information about the risks of COVID for smokers.

The latest figures from NHS England reflect a heavily loaded health system, with adult critical care bed occupancy at 67% across England. Public Health England is advising [smokers](#) to quit to improve their chances of avoiding infection and surviving COVID-19 if contracted.

This research can help tailor such communication for optimal impact, prioritizing messages that reference COVID-related health risk.

More information: Simone Pettigrew et al, The Potential Effectiveness of COVID-Related Smoking Cessation Messages in Three Countries, *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/ntr/ntab023](#)

Provided by George Institute for Global Health

APA citation: Smokers motivated to 'quit for COVID' to ease burden on health system (2021, March 30)
retrieved 18 April 2021 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-03-smokers-covid-ease-burden-health.html>

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