

The Role of Intensive Counseling in Tobacco Use Treatment: A Provider's Guide

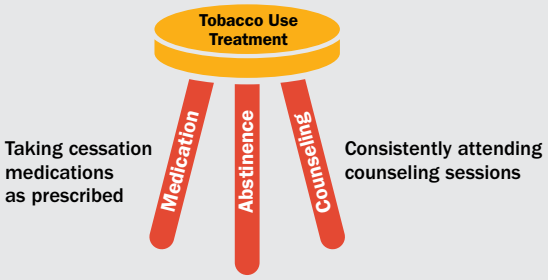
When having conversations with patients about quitting tobacco use, it is important to explain guidance recommending intensive counseling over less intensive counseling. As a provider, prescribing nicotine patches or gum may seem to be the quicker choice, however, considering all treatment options supports a patient-centered approach and increases the likelihood of long-term tobacco cessation.

What difference does intensive counseling make?

- Enhances the effectiveness of tobacco cessation medications
- Improves quit rates
- Leads to higher likelihood of sustained abstinence

What aspects make counseling intensive?

- Provide at least four in-person encounters with a licensed mental health professional, each longer than 10 minutes.
- Explain time commitment: It could take anywhere from months to years.
- Provide education on tobacco use disorder.
- Review of triggers for use and cultivation of coping skills, which can include partnering with patients to fill out a Quit Plan.
- Apply motivational interviewing techniques to help patients increase readiness to quit using tobacco.
- Provide education on the cessation process: This includes consistently attending counseling sessions, taking cessation medications as prescribed, and taking steps towards abstinence. Understand that there may be times when one of these components may be unattainable or off balance, and that can be part of the cessation process (see graphic below).



For ideas on starting conversations with patients about their tobacco use and treatment options, refer to the 5 A's of Tobacco Treatment to guide these discussions:

Action and Sample Dialogue
1. **ASK** about tobacco use.
You: "To make sure we're covering all areas of your health, I'd like to ask you about your tobacco and nicotine use, is that okay?"
If no, skip to #4.
If yes: **You:** "Do you currently use any tobacco or nicotine products, such as cigarettes/ e-cigarettes, vaping devices, nicotine pouches, or chewing tobacco?"
If yes: **You:** "Thank you for sharing that. Could you tell me a bit more about what products you use, and how often you use them each day or week?"
2. **ADVISE** on the benefits of quitting.
You: "Stopping your use of nicotine or tobacco products is the most important thing you can do for your health. You probably know it decreases your risk of cancer and heart and lung disease. Nicotine or tobacco use also negatively impacts all organs in your body."
You: [Discuss individualized health concerns that can improve from quitting]
You: "Quitting can be challenging and takes time, but counseling and medication can make it more manageable."
3. **ASSESS** readiness to quit.
You: "I'm here to support you and can help connect you with treatment that can help you quit. Are you interested in quitting?"
If yes: **You:** "That's great. Quitting tobacco is a process and may even take multiple attempts. The important thing is you're ready to make a change and sometimes change can look like a roller coaster rather than a straight line to your goal."
If no: **You:** "I understand. If it's okay, we can discuss this again in a future appointment."
4. **ASSIST** in creating a plan.
If the patient is ready: **You:** "Let's talk about treatment options. Consistently attending counseling while also taking cessation medications as prescribed has shown to be incredibly beneficial. We can figure out a plan that's a good fit for you."
If the patient is not ready: **You:** "I understand. It's a big step. When you do feel ready, please know that I'm here to help you create a plan."
5. **ARRANGE** for follow-up and support.
You: "To give you the best chance of success, I'm going to connect you with our tobacco cessation resources. We can schedule a follow-up to see how you're doing and to make sure you have the support you need every step of the way."



Knowing how intensive counseling can enhance tobacco cessation treatment for your patients and how to bring up the topic of their tobacco use equips you with the necessary tools to provide patient-centered care. See the next page for additional resources to use throughout a patient's continuum of care.

Resources for Your Patients

YouCanQuit2 (ycq2.org) is a Department of War supported education program for service members that offers coaching, online tools, and in-person support locators to help you quit tobacco.

1-855-QUIT-VET (1-855-784-8838) is a free telephone quit line that offers tobacco cessation counseling to any veteran who receives their healthcare through VA. Quit coaches can help throughout the tobacco cessation journey, from thinking about quitting or when ready to quit. More information can be found here: mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/quit-vet.asp

Military OneSource provides 24/7 support and information on housing, financial, legal, medical, and psychological services.
- CONUS: 800-342-9647
- OCONUS and collect options available at: militaryonesource.mil

Military/Veterans Crisis Line provides free, confidential resource for those in crisis that is available 24/7. Dial 988, then press 1 to talk with a counselor or text 838255 for live chat. OCONUS options available. militarycrisisline.net

988 provides free and confidential support for individuals in crisis. If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, call or text 988. 988lifeline.org

Real Warriors Campaign provides resources to decrease stigma, increase psychological health literacy, and open doors to access to care. health.mil/RealWarriors

Reference

1. Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense. (2026). *VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline for Tobacco Use Treatment.* Version 3.0. https://www.healthquality.va.gov/HEALTHQUALITY/guidelines/CD/tobacco/Tobacco-Cessation-CPG_2026-Guideline_final_20260109.pdf

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