

Research Brief

Financial incentives for stopping smoking: how and why do they work?

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Study info

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<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/tobaccocontrol/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/living-well/quit-smoking/>

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Summary

Smoking among the general population has been on the decline however lower income groups are still more likely to smoke than those on a higher income. New approaches to helping people to stop smoking are needed to help all populations move toward the goal of a tobacco free Ireland.

It is well established that financial incentives help people stop smoking and that smokers who receive a financial incentive are 50% more likely to stop than those who receive other types of support.

This study (Siersbaek et al, forthcoming 2023) found that financial incentives are particularly useful to help people stop smoking if they have a financial need, are pregnant or recently post-partum, have a high threshold for behaviour change, and/or respond well to external rewards. The incentives work through a number of mechanisms including the role their direct monetary value can play in a person's life and through a process of reinforcement where they can help build confidence and self-esteem.

This is the first study to synthesise how, why and for whom financial incentives work among those attempting to stop smoking, adding to the existing evidence demonstrating their efficacy. The findings will support the implementation of current knowledge into effective programmes which can enhance the impact of stop smoking care.

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". . witnessing improved carbon monoxide levels and/or receiving related praise from the smoking cessation counsellors was perceived to increase confidence and was thus perceived as facilitating efforts: 'It's just more of a moral support I think really and checking your carbon levels and once you realise you've done good, you know, it boosts your confidence to keep, keep not smoking, do you know what I mean?'" -- Mantzari et al 2012

"Some participants expressed that vouchers were an incentive for behaviour initiation. For example, one participant explained that initially the vouchers were a great motivator, until the pleasure of not smoking maintained their desire to stay abstinent" - Notley et al 2019

". . consumers and professionals in our study reported that unrestricted vouchers can promote individual autonomy for the most disadvantaged through providing a rare opportunity for choice and self-reward . . . incentives would provide vulnerable individuals with one of the first opportunities to receive a reward and acknowledgement for an achievement" - Thomson et al 2014

Mantzari E, et al. (2012) The effectiveness of financial incentives for smoking cessation during pregnancy: is it from being paid or from the extra aid?

Notley C, et al. (2019) Incentives for smoking cessation.

Thomson G, et al (2014). Unintended consequences of incentive provision for behaviour change and maintenance around childbirth.

Research highlights

- Financial incentives carry meaning beyond their monetary value. For different people, incentives help to create a range of feelings such as being valued, supported and praise. They can help create confidence and a sense of autonomy. For some people, a stop smoking attempt can be transformative through the experience of succeeding at something important and difficult, and being rewarded.
- Financial incentives work well to help pregnant women to stop smoking often working in tandem with an existing desire to protect their own health and that of their baby. Financial incentives allow pregnant women to purchase items for their baby and to provide for their own self-care and wellness during pregnancy.
- Financial incentives work differently at different stages of a stop smoking attempt. At the outset, they can be the external push that someone needs to engage with services where incentives can provide immediate motivation until the various health benefits of not smoking begin to be experienced.
- Later in a stop smoking attempt, financial incentives support the idea that undertaking a stop smoking attempt is a valuable thing to be validated. As a person is successful in continually engaging with a stop smoking attempt, feelings of self-esteem and confidence can build.

Policy and Research Implications

- Stop smoking interventions using financial incentives should be designed with the capacity to:
 - Understand what motivates a client
 - Frame financial incentives to support innate motivation
 - Understand the potential transformative power of financial incentives
 - Use financial incentives as one among many tools, only when helpful
- Further research on financial incentives to stop smoking should focus on evaluating the success of design and implementation strategies so that evidence of the effectiveness is translated into real-world benefits especially for population groups with greatest need.