How Does Smoking Affect Your Skin?

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Smoking and Psoriasis

It's no secret that smoking harms many systems within the body, but it can cause considerable damage on the surface, too. For years, researchers have been looking into the specific effects of smoking on the skin, and it appears that psoriasis definitely responds and reacts to a smoking habit.

Not surprisingly, the extent of skin inflammation depends on the amount you smoke, but one fact is clear and universal – smokers with psoriasis have a much more difficult time avoiding flare-ups and living with the disease.

Research Linking Smoking and Psoriasis

Several studies have investigated the connection between psoriasis and smoking, and while they didn't agree on every point, certain patterns did emerge.

Although it's impossible to say exactly how your smoking is affecting your disease and recovery, there's evidence to show that:

- **Smoking increases your risk of developing psoriasis.** Two prominent studies suggest that women smokers are over three times more likely to develop plaque-type psoriasis than non-smoking women.
- **Smoking affects the severity of symptoms.** Although it seems that smoking doesn't make a difference in the amount of psoriasis-affected area, men who smoke more than 10 cigarettes a day often experience more severe plaques in their extremities – namely, the forearms, hands, legs and feet.
- **Smoking sustains psoriasis.** In both men and women, smoking slows the improvement of psoriasis. In one study of 104 patients, 77% of the non-smokers saw improvement in their condition, but only about 9% of smokers experienced relief.

How Smoke May Worsen Flare-ups

It's very difficult to pinpoint what it is in tobacco smoke that increases the psoriasis risks, because there are so many poisonous ingredients. However, there are certain known triggers in cigarettes – and the lifestyle of smokers – that may be to blame for worsening psoriasis:

- **Nicotine**. Some experts believe that nicotine can alter the immune system (possibly sparking an autoimmune disorder) and even interfere with skin cell growth, which can inflame the skin.
- **Healing problems**. When you smoke, less oxygen travels through your body and to your tissues, which hinders your natural healing abilities. So, if you have skin lesions, plaques, or other irritated patches, they are more likely to last longer. If they crack or break, this leaves you more prone to infection, as the smoke prevents quick repair.
- **Coping mechanism**. Smoking, along with drugs and alcohol, is also a way to cope with stress. Since stress is a major psoriasis trigger, it follows that those psoriasis sufferers who smoke may be dealing with

a higher, more constant level of stress – or perhaps they're not able to cope with stress effectively.

Finding a New Way to Cope

For many smokers with psoriasis, cigarettes are an important coping mechanism, something to relieve the stress of the disease and provide a few moments peace of mind. The nicotine addiction is hard to break, but the emotional relief can be almost impossible to give up.

Luckily, things aren't always as hard as they seem, especially when you have a good arsenal of compromises and substitutes by your side.

Quitting smoking completely is obviously your best bet for fewer flare-ups and better healing. But even taking some steps to limit the number of cigarettes you smoke, and the instances you smoke throughout the day is well worth your while.

Pair your willpower with a few proven quitting techniques, and you'll be on your way to better skin:

- **Quit or limit your drinking**. There's no doubt that drinking encourages smoking. In fact, plenty of the psoriasis and smoking studies conducted in the past decades are of little use, because they failed to control for alcohol consumption. And since heavy drinking has been shown to both trigger psoriasis outbreaks and interfere with your response to treatment, there are plenty of reasons to cut back on the alcohol.
- **Focus on improving your diet**. It can be hard at first, but switching to a more nutritious menu made up of smaller portions can make for a healthier body, and at the same time, an easier transition to your non-smoking life. Carrot sticks, cucumbers, apple slices, sour pickles, crispy wholegrain bread sticks – there are plenty of low-calorie snacks to satisfy any sort of craving. Get used to chopping up fresh, whole foods into bite-sized pieces, and keep containers of your snacks in your kitchen and workspace. Soon you'll begin to crave the fresh, crunchy foods, and that can help replace the craving for a cigarette.
- **Healthy stress relief**. Calm and relaxing hobbies are incredibly powerful tools when you're making a challenging change. Quitting smoking will demand a lot of willpower, but visualization, mindful meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and cognitive behavioural therapy are some of the techniques that can help you center your thoughts and comfort your body.

There are lots of quit smoking strategies, and as many smokers will tell you, they won't all work for you. But don't give up too soon: it could take a week or two, but your skin is the first place you'll see the results of a healthy lifestyle change, and that can be great motivation to continue on your healthier, smoke-free way.