

## Providing Nicotine Replacement Therapy in Focus Groups

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In many research studies, tobacco users are asked to forgo tobacco during study appointments to avoid interrupting study sessions with breaks or disrupting research flow and efficiency. Although onset of withdrawal varies according to levels of nicotine dependence, symptoms commonly begin within 30 minutes of abstinence.<sup>1</sup> Symptoms of nicotine withdrawal include irritability, restlessness, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating.<sup>2</sup> Nicotine cravings pose a particular problem in tobacco research, as discussion of tobacco products and tasks participants complete may act as triggers to use.<sup>3</sup> In recent focus groups among adults that currently smoke cigarettes, we offered nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) to participants to prevent nicotine withdrawal and encourage participants to stay in the 90-minute session. To our knowledge, no previous research has undertaken this approach. This letter documents the use and perceptions of NRT in our focus groups, and makes recommendations based on our experience.

NRT can reduce the desire to use cigarettes and ameliorate withdrawal symptoms experienced during quit attempts.<sup>4</sup> While NRT is most commonly used to aid in smoking cessation, research shows that NRT is safe to use regardless of quit intentions, and that certain products can be used on demand to combat acute nicotine cravings.<sup>5</sup> NRT is supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and was added to the WHO Model List of Essential Medicines in 2009.<sup>6,7</sup> NRT products are available in most countries, although accessibility is limited in many developing countries.<sup>8</sup> In the United States NRT can be purchased over the counter in the form of a patch, gum or a lozenge. The nicotine lozenge is especially effective for curbing acute tobacco cravings, as it allows the user to control the timing and dosage for rapid release of nicotine.

As part of a larger study on tobacco control communication, we conducted five focus groups with adults who currently smoke cigarettes. The 90-minute sessions had no planned breaks so that the flow of discussion was not interrupted. We provided 2 mg nicotine lozenges that participants could use at any time. Lozenges were placed in the middle of the table with brief instructions for use, and participants were free to utilize them at any time during the study session.

Four of 51 participants utilized the nicotine lozenges, and reactions to the available NRT were overwhelmingly positive. Participants reported that the NRT provision helped avoid potential nicotine cravings and was a nice and respectful gesture. Typical comments included:

*“Yeah, it’s like a nice gesture.”*

*“... it was extremely thoughtful because that’s a good reason for us not to get up. . .”*

*“... it helps keep you calm, because we’re all smokers, so I think you definitely should keep offering those.”*

Participants offered suggestions to more effectively provide NRT in future research settings, indicating they would feel more comfortable if the products were passed around the table or placed at each seat in order to minimize the attention drawn to those who chose to utilize the products. Participants explained:

*“I think it would be better if you gave everyone like one.”*

*“... so it’s not, like, awkward.”*

Some participants’ lack of familiarity with NRT kept them from using the lozenges. Although the facilitators began each group with a short introduction, more in-depth instructions on the NRT product would be helpful to ensure that participants understand product function and purpose. Participants also suggested providing regular mints or gum for those who do not wish to utilize NRT.

The positive feedback we received from participants and the ease of use of NRT in the focus groups suggests that NRT should be an option for many research studies involving tobacco users in order to minimize participant tobacco cravings and prevent breaks or disruptions in research flow. The provision of NRT could also serve as a modest incentive for tobacco users to participate in research and public engagement activities. Future research should investigate this possibility as well as its possible impact on interest in quitting. In our subsequent studies, we will give more detailed instructions for the use of NRT, place the NRT so that participants are able to utilize it without drawing attention, and provide regular gum or candy alongside the NRT. Providing NRT is a helpful strategy to engage current tobacco users in a research setting.

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## Declaration of Interests

None declared.

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