



## Bad Health Habits Rob 12 Years From Life Span: 6 Ways to Boost Willpower

Habits like smoking and not exercising add up to a shorter life span. How to stick with good ones

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Video: Set a Quit Day

Don't smoke, don't drink (too much), eat right, exercise. We've all heard these credos and try our very best to follow them, but perhaps we now have a little more incentive: an extra 12 years of life. That's the finding of a [new study](#) published in yesterday's *Archives of Internal Medicine*, which found that the risk of dying increases significantly for those who smoke, exercise less than two hours a week, eat less than three daily servings of fruits and vegetables, *and* consume more than

two drinks a day.

Unfortunately, bad habits are really hard to break. That's why 90 percent of us fail to [keep our New Year's resolutions](#). So what can we do to increase our willpower? Actually, quite a lot, say psychologists. It's all about learning to handle those urges that lead you to partake in unhealthy behaviors; handling them the right way actually spurs the development of certain brain regions making it easier to resist future cravings. Try the following:

**1. Think long-term consequences rather than short-term pleasures.** When presented with a cigarette, smokers who were told to envision the long-term consequences of smoking (lung cancer, heart disease, early death) were far more likely to resist the urge to light up than those who were told to imagine the short-term benefits of smoking (it feels good, it's calming), according to a January study from Columbia University. The researchers also found the same held true for nonsmokers faced with tempting foods; participants had better control over their cravings when they thought about long-term weight gain, as opposed to the immediate bliss of, say, biting into that gooey chocolate bar. "It's natural to think about the now rather than the later," says study author Hedy Kober, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale University School of Medicine. "But we showed that people can teach themselves to think differently to the extent that smokers actually found they wanted cigarettes less when they used the 'think later' approach."

**2. Pay attention.** Practicing [mindfulness meditation](#) for a few minutes each day can actually boost willpower by building up gray matter in areas of the brain that regulate emotions and govern decision making. "Paying attention to what's happening in the moment, what's going on in your body, your mind, and all around you, can make it easier to tune in to choices you make several hundred times a

day when it comes to eating," says health psychologist Kelly McGonigal who teaches a class on the science of willpower at Stanford University. [Click here](#) to try one of her short meditation exercises.

**3. Distract yourself.** Researchers have shown that those who exercise the most self-restraint are better able than others to banish tempting thoughts from their minds. "When a craving hits, lightly squeeze your fist and think about what it feels like," recommends McGonigal. Next, spend a few minutes focusing on your breathing, how the air is entering and leaving your body. If you have time to go outside for a walk to distract yourself, even better. An opposite approach that also works, says Kober, is to apply mindfulness to your cravings. Acknowledge that you have the urge to grab the chips in the pantry, without passing judgment on yourself or your urges. You'll probably find that the craving passes in about 15 minutes.

**4. Set small, realistic goals.** A handful of studies have demonstrated that those instructed to make small changes, like sitting up straighter, were able to raise their scores on lab tests for self-control. While the research isn't conclusive, setting small goals makes sense from a more-likely-to-succeed perspective. Whatever goal you set for yourself, cut it in half, McGonigal recommends. If you vow to lose 30 pounds, shoot for 15. Set a goal to exercise once or twice a week instead of every day if you're just starting to work out. "Setting small goals will give you small successes that will motivate you to continue," she explains. Also, you need to anticipate failure (like gaining a pound after you've lost two), so you don't end up getting derailed.

**5. Don't get too hungry—or too sleep-deprived.** Feeling famished lowers your willpower, according to Florida State University researchers who found that those who had low blood glucose levels from not eating performed worse on self-control tasks than those who were satiated. Same goes for those who sleep less than six hours a night. "They're much more susceptible to giving in to cravings," says McGonigal. "Sometimes the answer to getting more willpower is to just sleep a little more." And be sure to eat every four hours during the day to keep your brain fueled with glucose.

**6. Give it three weeks.** Research suggests it takes about 21 days of following a new behavior—whether it's going to the gym or avoiding alcohol—to establish those brain connections that make a new routine feel, well, old. "For some people it could be 21 days, for others 15, or for others 30," says Kober, "but what's clear is that the more often you practice a different activity, the more likely you are to repeat it." You should also be aware that one slip-up doesn't mean you've failed. Taking one drink after you've been sober for months, she adds, doesn't automatically set the brain back into a pattern of alcoholism.