

A Journey to Stop Smoking

Smokers from all over the country travel to The Mayo Clinic to get treatment in its tobacco cessation program. by Shelly Plutowski



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Last June, nine strangers, ages 40 to 70, came together in Rochester, Minn., to spend eight tense days together. Each faced a daunting challenge: to stop smoking. They shared a hope, that away from everyday stressors, they could begin the process of becoming smoke-free. They succeeded, and along the way, found lasting friendship and support from others who were gripped by tobacco.

"They see people who look like them, feel like them, and who are having the same difficulty," says Dr. Richard Hurt, who started the Mayo Clinic's residential tobacco cessation program (mayoclinic.org/ndc-rst) 12 years ago.

Long-time smoker Andy McIntyre from Los Angeles, says at first he wondered what he

had gotten himself into. "Forty-eight hours later I thought, 'These are the nicest people in the world.'"

The residential program is designed for those who have repeatedly tried less intense treatment and have been unable to quit smoking. "Some can't stop unless they are in a protected, smoke-free environment," Hurt says.

At Mayo Clinic, that means 24-hour supervision. "From Friday to Tuesday we couldn't even leave the floor to get a newspaper," says Linda Holstein, an attorney from Minneapolis, who had smoked for 33 years.

During the eight days, patients are busy with individual treatment—medications are tailored to relieve withdrawal symptoms—as well as group and individual counseling, exercise and education. Participants learn how to ask for help—something that smokers often are reluctant to do.

In this group, two of the nine group members slipped in the first six months after treatment, but are now tobacco-free again. Months after completing the program, Ruth Miner, a retiree from Corinth, N.Y., who had smoked three to four packs a day for 45 years, contacts group members at least once a week. "I'm the sheriff," she says. "I keep them all in line."

Each year, about 100 people go through Mayo Clinic's residential program, one of only a handful of residential programs in the country. One year after residential treatment, 45 percent of patients are smoke-free, about double the stop rate of outpatient programs. Increasingly, the program is partially covered by insurance. The cost is \$5,000.

For Holstein who had tried everything else to quit, says the residential group experience was "fabulous." "We started with nothing in common but a nicotine addiction," she says.

Before the week was out, the new friends were literally dancing on the tables.

"We're still very close," says Holstein. "Our bond is what we went through together." ▼

Illustration by Michael Gibbs