



NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

FAQs : Coverage for NRTs and Tobacco Cessation Medications

• **What is the difference between NRTs and tobacco cessation medications?**

Nicotine replacement therapies or “NRTs” provide nicotine to the body in controlled doses to lessen exposure to tobacco. They include nicotine gum, lozenges, patches and inhalers and are available over the counter. Prescription medications like bupropion (*bew-PROP-e-on*) and varenicline (*ver-EN-e-kleen*) do not contain nicotine but affect nicotine receptors in the brain to manage cravings and withdrawal symptoms.

• **Are NRTs and cessation medications covered by private health insurance plans?**

Sometimes, but not always. Smokers with private drug insurance coverage for cessation medications and NRTs are more likely to use cessation aids. However, not all insurance plans cover the cost of cessation therapies because they are classified as “lifestyle” drugs.

• **Do other provinces cover the cost of NRTs and tobacco cessation medications?**

Yes. Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick are the only provinces in Canada that do not offer some form of financial assistance for NRTs or tobacco cessation medications. Refer to the appendix of the NLMA’s *Position Paper on Coverage for NRTs and Tobacco Cessation Medications* for a list of programs in other provinces and territories.

• **Why is the NLMA advocating for subsidized tobacco cessation therapies?**

Part of the NLMA’s mission is to provide leadership in the provision of excellent health care in Newfoundland and Labrador. As such, the Association has established partnerships with a number of health advocacy groups in the province. A year ago, the NLMA Board of Directors endorsed the Alliance for the Control of Tobacco’s *Tobacco Reduction Strategy* and the NLMA’s position paper stems from recommendations in that strategy.

• **Why are you only targeting low-income smokers and not all smokers?**

The NLMA is not opposed to universal coverage of NRTs and tobacco cessation medications for all residents in the province. However, the Association acknowledges that adding new benefits to the province’s health care budget may be a challenge for government. The NLMA and its partners had to determine where the need for these therapies is most urgent and where it will have the greatest impact. Research shows that smokers with lower socio-economic status have higher smoking rates and are less likely to quit. Part of the reason is that for many, the cost of purchasing tobacco cessation therapies is expensive and unaffordable. The NLMA and its partners believe that by making cessation therapies more accessible, the province will begin to see a reduction in tobacco use among groups with the highest smoking rates.

- **If smokers can afford cigarettes why can't they afford cessation therapies?**

The answer is simple. They are addicted to nicotine. Nicotine addiction is no different than the addiction to any drug and people will use whatever resources they have to feed it. As a society, we must begin to realign our perception of nicotine addiction as a serious chronic condition, not a lifestyle choice. Government has a responsibility to help them break the cycle, just as they would provide methadone for someone with an opioid addiction.

- **How much will it cost to include tobacco cessation therapies under the NLPDP?**

It is not the job of the NLMA to determine how much money is needed to fund tobacco cessation therapies. As patient advocates, it's the NLMA's job to highlight where the gaps are in the province's health care system and what government can do to address them. The NLMA believes the cost for this strategy is something government will have to work out. Keep in mind that although there are 87,000 smokers in the province, they do not all meet the criteria for NLPDP coverage and there will not be 100 per cent uptake from everyone who meets the criteria.

If a province like British Columbia can pay for nicotine therapies for ALL its residents, than Newfoundland and Labrador should be able to subsidize these therapies for its low-income residents who want to quit smoking but can't afford cessation therapies.

- **What is the Smokers' Helpline?**

The Smokers' Helpline (SHL) is a toll-free confidential telephone service (1-800-363-5864) administered by the Newfoundland and Labrador Lung Association and funded by the provincial government. Anyone in Newfoundland and Labrador can call the SHL to receive help to quit smoking. Since 2000, the SHL has offered a variety of services to support individuals in quitting including motivational telephone counseling, self-help materials, group programs, and innovative web-based supports such as e-counseling. Individuals are also eligible to receive proactive telephone counseling, whereby a Helpline counselor calls them to check in, address concerns or questions and offer support in moving through the stages of quitting.

- **Will the Smokers' Helpline recommend specific brands of NRTs to smokers?**

No. The Smokers' Helpline will only provide advice on the different types of available NRTs, not specific brands. Ultimately, it is up to the smoker to decide what method they want to use be it the patch, gum, lozenges or an inhaler.

- **What are the brand names of prescription tobacco cessation medications?**

Bupropion is commonly marketed in Canada as Zyban or Wellbutrin.
Varenicline is commonly marketed in Canada as Champix.

- **Hasn't Champix been linked to side effects like depression and suicide?**

Health Canada has approved Champix as being safe to prescribe based on scientific evidence from controlled clinical studies. There is potential for any medication to result in adverse side effects. You have to contrast that by the thousands of cases where the drug has been successful in treating patients. Physicians have to determine the benefits and the risks of any medication they prescribe, as well as the medical history of the individual patient.