

COVID-19 lockdown has mixed effects on smokers

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New Zealand's COVID-19 lockdown had mixed effects on smoking behaviors, a University of Otago study reveals.

The results of the survey, undertaken by University of Otago, Wellington researchers Professor Janet Hoek, Dr. Philip Gendall, Associate Professor James Stanley, Dr. Matthew Jenkins and Dr. Susanna Every-Palmer, have been published in the international journal *Nicotine and Tobacco Research*.

Of the 261 daily smokers surveyed, 45 percent reported increasing the number of cigarettes they smoked from an average 10 cigarettes a day to 16, Professor Hoek says.

"That's about two packs of cigarettes a week, which is a substantial and expensive increase."

The survey also revealed that among daily smokers about 16 percent smoked fewer cigarettes and 39 percent reported no change in their [smoking](#) habits.

Similar changes in smoking behaviors were also seen during the Christchurch earthquake and research examining this event found increases in smoking were sustained after the earthquake.

"For obvious reasons, the pandemic response focussed on preventing the spread of COVID-19. However, as we plan for other disease outbreaks, we have an opportunity to consider well-being more broadly," Professor Hoek says.

"The Government's Smokefree 2025 goal needs to feature prominently in this planning as people who have quit smoking may relapse during times of stress, and these changes may persist beyond the precipitating crisis.

"Developing outreach programs to support people who have recently become smokefree, or who were embarking on quit attempts via cessation services prior to a crisis event, could help manage triggers that would otherwise promote relapse."

Dr. Every-Palmer says people who felt distressed or lonely during lockdown were more likely to have smoked more. In fact, those who felt lonely or isolated almost all the time were more than three times more likely to increase their cigarette intake than those who were never lonely.

"This finding was not related to whether people lived alone or with others, which suggests living alone is not necessarily the same as being lonely," she says.

"Future pandemic planning could also examine how people can retain feelings of connection."

Dr. Gendall agreed.

"Our findings extend our earlier mental well-being article and suggest interventions that help people feel connected could reduce the risk they will use smoking as a tool to manage stress.

"To support these people, and help realize the Government's smokefree 2025 goal, we need to explore how helping people feel connected in general, and able to access cessation support in particular, could be enhanced to suit pandemic situations," he says.

More information: Philip Gendall et al. Changes in Tobacco Use During the 2020 COVID-19 Lockdown in New Zealand, *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/ntr/ntaa257](https://doi.org/10.1093/ntr/ntaa257)

Provided by University of Otago

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