

**SMOKING CESSATION BENEFIT FOR VHA EMPLOYEES: NO-COST PROVISION  
OF NICOTINE REPLACEMENT THERAPY**

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) directive provides policy for the provision of free nicotine replacement therapy (NRT).
- 2. SUMMARY OF MAJOR CHANGES:** None.
- 3. RELATED ISSUES:** None.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** VHA Occupational Health (10P4Z) is responsible for the contents of this directive. Questions may be addressed to 202-382-2531.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** VHA Directive 2010-041, dated September 16, 2010.
- 6. RECERTIFICATION:** This VHA directive is scheduled for recertification on or before the last business day of August 2022. This VHA directive will continue to serve as national VHA policy until it is recertified or rescinded.

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Acting Under Secretary for Health

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## SMOKING CESSATION BENEFIT FOR VHA EMPLOYEES: NO-COST PROVISION OF NICOTINE REPLACEMENT THERAPY

### 1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) directive provides policy for the provision of free nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) over-the-counter (OTC) medications to employees in VHA who seek assistance with quitting smoking as part of VHA's core preventive health mission. **NOTE:** *This directive serves as a supplement to VA Directive 5019, Employee Occupational Health Service. The procedures contained herein have been incorporated into VA Handbook 5019, Occupational Health Services, Part IV, Appendix B.* **AUTHORITY:** Title 5 United States Code (U.S.C.) 7901.

### 2. BACKGROUND

a. Smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death and disease in the United States, despite the availability of effective and readily available interventions, such as NRT. -Given the health impacts of smoking, tobacco cessation counseling is an integral component of VHA's health promotion and disease prevention programs.

b. Tobacco dependence is a chronic disease that often requires repeated intervention and multiple attempts to quit. Evidence suggests that with NRT support twice as many quitters achieve six months of sustained abstinence. NRT, in the forms of a nicotine patch, gum or lozenge, is the most commonly used smoking cessation medication, with a well-documented safety record.

c. VHA is a national leader in health promotion and disease prevention. Providing free NRT as part of ongoing smoking cessation efforts for employees, as a health promotion and disease prevention initiative, is consistent with VHA's central health care mission and goal of being an employer of choice.

d. Tobacco cessation programs are considered preventive in nature and are authorized under Title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.). Section 7901(c) (4), which provides Federal agencies with the authority to use appropriated funds to pay the costs of tobacco cessation programs. Tobacco cessation programs should include individual and group counseling and provision of pharmacologic therapy such as nicotine replacement therapy. VA's Office of General Counsel has advised that the definition of preventive health services for employees, as provided in 5 U.S.C. 7901, includes smoking cessation counseling and medications. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has determined that Federal agencies may use appropriated funds to provide NRT at no cost to employees.

According to data from the 2015 All Employee Survey health promotion module, the smoking prevalence in all employees is 14.4%, and 22.4% in Veteran employees. The Institute of Medicine Report, "Combating Tobacco Use in Military and Veteran Population," recommended that, as part of a comprehensive tobacco control program, both the Department of Defense and VA provide barrier-free access to smoking cessation treatment, including NRT to assist employees who want to quit tobacco use.

e. A number of VA medical facilities have successfully implemented policies to provide free OTC NRT for employees who are seeking assistance with quitting smoking. These include:

- (1) Providing free OTC NRT purchased by VA;
- (2) Providing OTC NRT through an outside vendor;
- (3) Providing free OTC NRT through existing employee health clinics;
- (4) Providing free OTC NRT through existing facility tobacco cessation programs;
- (5) Providing vouchers for purchasing OTC NRT through VA canteens; and
- (6) Contracting with state or private telephone counseling quit lines for services, including OTC NRT.

f. Overall, smoking rates have decreased in VHA since 2010. Following the publication of the VHA NRT policy in 2010, in addition to implementation via the WIN by Quitting Tobacco National Pilot Project, the prevalence of smoking in VHA decreased 0.8 percent by 2015. This is equivalent to an estimated savings of \$12,063,648 using CDC's cost calculator, accounting for overall costs to VHA for the provision of NRT to employees have been minimal since policy inception. According to data from Pharmacy Benefits Management (PBM), VHA has spent a total of \$215,960 on 9,193 unique prescriptions to aid 2,435 employees in their attempts to quit tobacco use from FY11 to FY16.

### 3. POLICY

It is VHA policy to provide free OTC formulations of NRT in appropriate combinations of the nicotine patch, gum, and lozenge to employees who are seeking assistance with quitting smoking as part of preventive health initiatives for employees. The original prescription may include refills for multiple courses as determined appropriate by the provider.

### 4. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. **Veterans Integrated Service Network Director.** Each Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Director is responsible for ensuring that VISN and facility policies comply with this directive regarding the provision of OTC forms of NRT to employees.

b. **VA Medical Facility Director.** Each VA medical facility Director is responsible for ensuring that:

- (1) A facility policy providing free OTC NRT is developed, published, and implemented in accordance with this directive and is consistent with VHA's established

drug accountability procedures. This policy should be provided to the Occupational Health Service.

(2) The provision of free OTC NRT is incorporated into smoking cessation programs for employees as part of employee health promotion and disease prevention programs or existing smoking cessation services in the facility. Employees may obtain this free benefit by requesting prescription orders for OTC NRT from the Employees Health Office (see subpar. 4b[3]).

(3) The Employees' Health Office or other authorized provider (as defined in local facility policy) issues employee prescriptions for OTC NRT to be dispensed by VA pharmacies. The employee should be assessed for the appropriate dose of NRT required and provided with a full course of treatment. All employees who request OTC NRT are also encouraged to utilize tobacco cessation counseling services.

(4) OTC NRT is made available to all VHA employees who are attempting to quit tobacco use.

(5) OTC NRT is free of charge or co-payment.

(6) OTC NRT is made available at the worksite or by mail to the employee's home.

(7) It is strongly recommended that OTC NRT is a component of a comprehensive tobacco cessation program. A comprehensive tobacco cessation program utilizes OTC NRT as an adjunct to smoking cessation counseling in a group and/or individual setting.

(8) The facility provides an annual report to VHA Occupational Health on the number of employees who receive NRT through this program by January 30 for the previous calendar year.

## 5. REFERENCES

a. VA Handbook 5019, Occupational Health Services, Part IV, Appendix B, <http://vaww.va.gov/OHRM/Directives-Handbooks/Documents/5019.pdf>. **NOTE:** *This is an internal VA Web site not available to the public.*

b. Title 5 U.S.C. 7901(c).

c. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Smoking-Attributable Mortality, Years of Potential Life Lost, and Productivity Losses - United States, 2002-2004," Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR). 57(45), 1226-1228: 2008.

d. Fiore MC, Jaen CR, Baker TB, et al. "Treating tobacco use and dependence: 2008 update. Clinical practice guideline." Rockville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service; 2008.

e. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Cigarette Smoking Among Adults - United States, 2007," MMWR. 57(45), 1221-1226: 2008.

f. Institute of Medicine. Combating Tobacco Use in Military and Veteran Populations. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2009.

g. Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) pricing data is available at:  
<https://www.va.gov/oal/business/fss/pharmPrices.asp>.