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Quit smoking today and get cold turkey sandwich

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A blustery chill couldn't stop William Butler from lighting up a cigarette Wednesday morning.

"I tried to quit, but I just enjoy it too much," he said. "I'm too nervous without it, and I just like the taste."

Many smokers would agree it's not easy to quit smoking.

But quitting is important, health experts agree. And today is a good day to start.

Today marks the 29th annual Great American Smokeout, a nationwide effort by the American Cancer Society to prompt smokers to quit, if only for one day.

"Once people realize they can quit for a day, it gives them inspiration to do it permanently," said Megan Shea, Cessation Systems coordinator with the Muskogee County Health Department.

The Muskogee County Health Department and the Cherokee Nation will help people quit cold turkey by offering cold turkey sandwiches in exchange for tobacco products including cigarettes, cigars, chewing tobacco and snuff. The Health Department also is offering chances to win a Thanksgiving turkey.

"There's nothing better tobacco users can do for their health than to quit," Shea said. "We're asking everyone in Muskogee County to help spread the word about this free event to their loved ones and co-workers."

Shea is involved with the Muskogee Turning Point Coalition, one of 16 local coalitions across Oklahoma participating in the Communities of Excellence program. The program, funded by the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust, seeks to reduce the toll of tobacco in Oklahoma.

Tobacco is seen as the leading preventable cause of death in Oklahoma, killing about 5,700 people a year.

Shea said she wants to use the Smokeout to spread the word about the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline, a toll-free line that provides free, personalized help and advice on how to quit smoking. Callers enrolled in the Helpline's "Free & Clear" program work with a Quit Coach, to help them work out a plan to be able to successfully quit.

The Muskogee County Health Department also offers Freedom from Smoking classes that are filled on an as-needed basis, Shea said.

The Cherokee Nation's Healthy Nation program also seeks to help people quit smoking or dipping.

"The Healthy Nation Staff has partnered with area businesses and merchants to assist in giving up the habit of nicotine," said Cherokee Nation Health Educator June Maher. "During the Smokeout, we will provide assistance to each smoker or smokeless tobacco user by providing a survival pack, educational materials, and individual support. In addition, each smoker's name will be placed in a drawing for a turkey."

Another Cherokee Nation health educator, Cora Flute, said she quit using smokeless tobacco three years ago.

“I saw how it was affecting my teeth, my lungs,” she said. “Smokeless tobacco is just as harmful or addictive as cigarettes.”

She said she decided one day to quit and hasn’t used since. But, she admits it wasn’t easy.

Shea said she doesn’t know why some smokers could quit cold-turkey while others struggle and try all sorts of programs and patches.

“People normally try to quit several times before they’re successful,” she said.

Butler, 55, said he has smoked since he was about 12 years old. He said he has tried to quit several times, once for as long as five days.

“People who have support in their lives find it easier to quit,” she said. “A lot of times, a nicotine patch is helpful.”

Flute said the key to quitting is determination.

“But we also need our own support systems,” she said.