

Varenicline (var-EN-nik-lin)

Varenicline, marketed under the brand name “Chantix,” is a quit-smoking medication approved by the FDA (for FDA information on [Varenicline, click here](#)). It is available by prescription only.

How it Works (*Package insert*)

Varenicline acts differently than the other cessation medications. It is neither a nicotine replacement therapy nor an anti-depressant drug. Varenicline acts on nicotine receptors with two types of action: It blocks rewarding effects of nicotine (antagonist) and at the same time reduces withdrawal (agonist). Varenicline, like all quit-smoking medications, is not a “magic pill” and should be used in conjunction with coaching on how to quit. Call **1-800-QUIT-NOW** (1-800-784-8669) to talk to live quit coaches on the phone; it’s completely free and confidential.

How Well it Works

In research studies, varenicline proved to be more effective than placebo or bupropion. Abstinence rates at the end of treatment were: 18% for placebo, 30% for bupropion and 44% for varenicline. These trials included counseling for all participants.

Side Effects and Contraindications

In research studies, varenicline was well tolerated, with overall discontinuation rates similar to placebo. The most common side effects included nausea, headache, trouble sleeping and abnormal dreams. The most common side effect—nausea—can be significantly reduced if the medication is taken with food and water. The FDA recommends healthcare providers use caution in patients: with significant renal impairment, with psychiatric conditions, undergoing dialysis.

Warnings

On July 1, 2009, the FDA notified the public and health-care providers that the use of Chantix (varenicline) has been associated with reports of changes in behavior such as hostility, agitation, depressed mood and suicidal thoughts or actions. The FDA is requiring the manufacturer of this product to add a new *Boxed Warning* to the product labeling to alert healthcare professionals to this important new safety information. **People who are taking Chantix and experience any serious and unusual changes in mood or behavior or who feel like hurting themselves or someone else should stop taking the medicine and call their healthcare professional right away.** For more, [click here](#). On June 16, 2011, the FDA notified the public and health-care providers that Chantix (varenicline) may be associated with a small, increased risk of certain cardiovascular adverse events **in patients who have pre-existing cardiovascular disease**. This safety information will be added to the Warnings and Precautions section of the Chantix labeling. The patient Medication Guide will also be revised to inform patients about this possible risk. For more, [click here](#).

Dosage and Cost

Start varenicline one week before the quit date for maximum effectiveness. Recommended treatment is 12 weeks:

- ⇒ Days 1-3:1 pill (0.5 mg) per day;
 - ⇒ Days 4-7:1 pill (0.5 mg) twice a day (a.m. and p.m.)
 - ⇒ Day 8 to the end:1 pill (1 mg) twice a day (a.m. and p.m.)
- For best results, quit smoking on Day 8*

An additional course of 12 weeks for maintenance can be considered. The manufacturer pre-packages Chantix so the pills are laid out day-by-day, in a “Starting Month” package (four weeks) and “Continuing Month” packages thereafter. Cost varies, but it is approximately \$120 per month (\$4 per day). Varenicline is covered by many health care plans.