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3 Easy Steps to Breaking Bad Habits

by Denise Mann, Reviewed by Louise Chang

(WebMD) We may be loath to admit it, but most of us have at least one bad habit. And while some bad habits -- such as smoking -- can pose serious health risks, others like nail biting, throat clearing, and knuckle cracking are really just plain irksome (for us and for the people that love us).



Odds are you have been biting your nails or cracking your knuckles for a long time. So how can you be expected to break these bad habits now?

Where there is a will, there is a way. No matter what your bad habit -- whether nail biting, knuckle cracking, cuticle picking, chronic coughing, or throat clearing -- WebMD's cadre of experts have a simple three-step solution that can be customized to whatever habit needs breaking.

"The more you do it, the more difficult it is to get rid of it, but every single bad habit can be broken," says Patricia A. Farrell, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Englewood, N.J. and author of *How to Be your Own Therapist*.

Here's how:

Step No. 1: Make It Conscious

The first step is to figure out when -- and why -- you bite your nails, crack your knuckles, or engage in any other bad habit. "If you can notice when you are doing it and under what circumstances and what feelings are attached to it, you might be able to figure out why you are doing it and be able to stop," says Susan Jaffe, MD, a psychiatrist in private practice in New York City.

Step No. 2: Put It in Writing So It Really Sinks In

"Log it," says Janet L. Wolfe, PhD, a clinical psychologist in New York City and author of several books including *What to Do When He Has a Headache*. This will help you establish a baseline, she says. "Put down the antecedents, the emotions surrounding the knuckle cracking and what goes through your head when you crack your knuckles," she says. "This will make your bad habit more conscious."

Wolfe suggests keeping the log for at least a week. The next step is to analyze the data and look at what your usual triggers are. "Do you do it when you are anxious or bored?"

James Claiborn, PhD, a psychologist in South Portland, Maine, and the co-author of *The Habit Change Workbook*, agrees. "Write out a list of the pros and cons of this behavior and keep a record of when you do it," he tells WebMD. "Measurement of anything tends to change it and makes people much more aware in the first place."

Step No. 3: Bait and Switch

Once you realize when and why you are biting your nails, cracking your knuckles, or engaging in any other bad habit, the next logical step is to find a not-quite-as-annoying temporary or permanent replacement for it.

"If you are a nail biter, try gum," Jaffe says.

"For throat clearing, the competing response may be some sort of slow exhaling because it is impossible to do that and clear your throat at same time," Claiborn says. "Develop a way of breathing whenever you feel the urge to clear your throat. You can see some

changes in a very short period of time. There will be a major reduction in throat clearing within days."

If knuckle cracking is your way of coping with stress, Wolfe, says, "Try getting your hands in a position where you won't be able to crack your knuckles. Or stroke the fabric of your sleeve, doodle, or do something else with your hands."

Meditation may also help break bad habits, she adds. Once you have identified the triggers, you can do meditation to distract yourself next time you are in a trigger situation.

Another tactic involves placing a large rubber band around your wrist, says Farrell. "Every time you become aware that you are [engaging in a bad habit], pull it back and allow it to snap so it creates a discomfort," she tells WebMD.