Like other medical conditions, nicotine addiction develops through stages of increasing severity. As addiction progresses, increasingly severe nicotine withdrawal symptoms form the basis for staging nicotine addiction. The staging of nicotine addiction reflects the physiology of the disease.

**Stage 1:** Beginning tobacco users may remain abstinent indefinitely without experiencing symptoms.

**Stage 2:** As physical dependence begins, the individual will experience a mild desire to use tobacco anytime he/she goes too long without using tobacco. This *mild desire* is short lived, easily ignored, and does not intrude upon the person’s thoughts.

**Stage 3:** In stage 3, whenever the individual goes too long without nicotine, he/she will experience the mild transient desire to use tobacco followed by a stronger desire that *intrudes* upon the person's thoughts. This stronger desire is more persistent and difficult to ignore.

**Stage 4:** When tobacco users in stage 4 forgo tobacco use for too long they will experience the same symptoms as described for stages 2 and 3 followed by an intense desire to use tobacco that is *urgent* and impossible to ignore. The individual feels that he/she needs to use tobacco in order to be able to feel and function normally.

By following the algorithm below, an individual’s stage of addiction can be determined in an average of one minute by asking if the following statements apply to them:

1. **Stage 1**
   - If I go too long without smoking I just can't function right, and I know I will have to smoke just to feel normal again.
   - If yes, stop here
   - If no, continue

2. **Stage 2**
   - If I go too long without smoking, the desire for a cigarette becomes so strong that it is hard to ignore and it interrupts my thinking.
   - If yes, stop here
   - If no, continue

3. **Stage 3**
   - I go too long without smoking the first thing I will notice is a mild desire to smoke that I can ignore.
   - If yes, stop here
   - If no, stop here

4. **Stage 4**
   - If I go too long without smoking I just can’t function right, and I know I will have to smoke just to feel normal again.
   - If yes, stop here
   - If no, continue

Please contact Joseph DiFranza MD, at difranzj@ummhc.org or 774-442-5658 for more information.
Populations of tobacco users at each stage differ from those in adjacent stages on *every measure* of addiction and tobacco use.

**Research Applications**

- Does the distribution of tobacco users across stages differ by: gender, race, ethnicity, SES or by state tobacco control policy?
- Are smokers in states with aggressive tobacco control policies more “hardcore”?

1 Measures include the Hooked on Nicotine Checklist (HONC), the Autonomy Over Tobacco Scale (AUTOS), the Fagerström Test of Nicotine Dependence, and the Modified Fagerström Tolerance Questionnaire.