

# The UConn Buzz



## KICKING THE HABIT

Why is it so hard to change our habits? About 70% of smokers say they would [like to quit](#). Drug and alcohol abusers struggle to give up addictions that hurt their bodies and tear apart families and friendships. And many of us have unhealthy excess weight that we could lose if only we would eat right and exercise more.

Scientists have been searching for answers. They've studied what happens in brains as habits form. They've found clues to why bad habits, once established, are so difficult to kick. "Habits play an important role in our health," says [Dr. Nora Volkow](#), director of NIH's National Institute on Drug Abuse. "Understanding the biology of how we develop routines that may be harmful to us, and how to break those routines and embrace new ones, could help us change our lifestyles and adopt healthier behaviors."

Habits can arise through repetition. They are a normal part of life, and are often helpful. "We wake up every morning, shower, comb our hair or brush our teeth without being aware of it," Volkow says. We can drive along familiar routes on mental auto-pilot without really thinking about the directions. "When behaviors become automatic, it gives us an advantage, because the brain does not have to use conscious thought to perform the activity," Volkow says. This frees up our brains to focus on different things. Habits can also develop when good or enjoyable events trigger the brain's "reward" centers. This can set up potentially harmful routines, such as overeating, smoking, drug or alcohol abuse, gambling and even compulsive use of computers and social media. "The general machinery by which we build both kinds of habits are the same, whether it's a habit for overeat-

ing or a habit for getting to work without really thinking about the details," says [Dr. Russell Poldrack](#), a neurobiologist at the Stanford University. "But there's one important difference," Poldrack says. And this difference makes the pleasure-based habits so much harder to break. Enjoyable behaviors can prompt your brain to release a chemical called dopamine. "If you do something over and over, and dopamine is there when you're doing it, that strengthens the habit even more. When you're not doing those things, dopamine creates the craving to do it again," Poldrack says. "This explains why some people crave drugs, even if the drug no longer makes them feel particularly good once they take it." In a sense, then, parts of our brains are working against us when we try to overcome bad habits. "These routines can become hardwired in our brains," Volkow says. And the brain's reward centers keep us craving the things we're trying so hard to resist.

The good news is, humans are not simply creatures of habit. We have many more brain regions to help us do what's best for our health. "Humans are much better than any other animal at changing and orienting our behavior toward long-term goals, or long-term benefits," says [Dr. Roy Baumeister](#), a psychologist at Florida State University. Bad habits may be hard to change, but it can be done. Dr. Kelly Traver, author of the book [The Program: The brain-smart approach to the healthiest you](#), says when it comes to making permanent, positive lifestyle changes, your brain can be uncooperative at first. It will resist you, at least in the beginning." Volkow notes that there's no single effective way to break bad habits. "It's not one size fits all," she says. In recent years, Dr. Baumeister has found evidence that regularly practicing different types of self-control (such as

sitting up straight or keeping a food diary) can strengthen your resolve. "We've found that you can improve your self-control by doing exercises over time," Baumeister says. "Any regular act of self-control will gradually exercise your 'muscle' and make you stronger."

One approach is to focus on becoming more aware of your unhealthy habits. Then develop strategies to counteract them.

Habits can be linked in our minds to certain places and activities. You could develop a plan to avoid walking down the hall where there's a candy machine. Resolve to avoid going places where you've usually smoked. Stay away from friends and situations linked to problem drinking or drug use.

Another helpful technique is to visualize yourself in a tempting situation. "Mentally practice the good behavior over the bad," Poldrack says. "If you'll be at a party and want to eat vegetables instead of fattening foods, then mentally visualize yourself doing that. It's not guaranteed to work, but it certainly can help."

Another option is to actively replace unhealthy routines with new, healthy ones. Some people find they can replace a bad habit, even drug addiction, with another behavior, like exercising. Enlist the help of friends, co-workers and family for some extra support. Research is exploring whether certain medications can help to behaviors in the brain and make it easier to form new memories and behaviors. Other teams are searching for genes that might allow some people to easily form or suppress habits.

Source: NIH News in Health

## HAPPENINGS AROUND TOWN

[Vaping 101: What Parents Need to Know About E-cigarettes](#), Friday, May 4 at 7pm, Ellington Middle School Library. Dana A. Cavallo, Ph.D, Asst. Prof. of Psychiatry at Yale will show the newest trends & dangers of e-cigarettes. Register w/Debbie Stauffer at [dstauffer@ellington-ct.gov](mailto:dstauffer@ellington-ct.gov). or call Youth Services at 860-870-3130

[35th Annual Foodshare Walk Against Hunger](#) - Saturday, May 5 at 10am, Dunkin' Donuts Park. The route is less than 2 miles, starting and ending at DD Park, registration starts at 8:30am

[Paws in the Park](#), Saturday, May 5, 9:30am till 3pm at Rye Street Park, 75 Brookfield St, South Windsor. A great event for dog owners, dog lovers & the entire family. Activities and attractions for your canine & everyone else. Your pup can take part in various dog contests, be in the Facebook cutest dog contest, and try out the rally course. Lots of booths & vendors offering products & services.

[Salmon River 5.5 mile and 2.5 mile run](#) - Saturday, May 12, 10am. Registration starts at 8am at the Salmon River Picnic Shelter (Firemen's Field), Route 16, Colchester. \$30.

[Speedy Silly Challenges](#), Wednesday, May 16, 4-5pm. Booth & Dimock Memorial Library, Coventry. Do different fun and silly challenges in a limited time frame!

[UCONN Summer Horse Riding Lessons](#) - The University of Connecticut's Animal Science Department will be offering its popular Summer Riding Program to the public. Please note that Dressage, Hunt Seat, Polo, Western riding lessons and Trail Riding are open to adults and children who meet the minimum age requirements.

[2018 E.O. Smith Crew 5K Road Race](#) - Saturday, June 9th, 9am. This race will go through the E.O. Smith and UCOON campuses. First 100 registered will receive a free t-shirt. Online registration - \$22, Day of - \$25.

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### Rhubarb Slush - 10 servings

#### INGREDIENTS

3 C fresh rhubarb, chopped

1 liter soda water

1 1/2 C water (from cooking the rhubarb)

1/2 C white sugar

6 oz frozen orange juice concentrate, thawed

6 oz frozen lemonade concentrate, thawed



#### DIRECTIONS

1. Place rhubarb in a large saucepan with water to cover. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat & cook until tender. Drain, reserving 1 1/2 Cups of water & mash or puree in a blender.
2. Stir together the rhubarb puree, sugar, orange juice, lemonade & water. Freeze.
3. Scoop the frozen mixture into serving glasses and fill the rest of the glass with soda water.

## 2018 National Asthma & Allergy Awareness Month

[Asthma](#) is a disease of the branches of the windpipe (bronchial tubes), which carry air in and out of the [lungs](#). There are several different types of [asthma](#). Common asthma symptoms are coughing, shortness of breath, wheezing and chest tightness

[Allergies](#) is a chronic disease in which the immune system reacts abnormally to a foreign substance. Common allergy symptoms include itchy eyes and skin, sneezing, nasal congestion, wheezing, and rash. Allergies are caused by allergens. Some common allergens are food, drugs, insects, latex, mold, pets and pollen.

There is no cure for asthma & allergies, and many deaths are preventable with proper treatment and care.

Here are some facts about the impact of Allergies & Asthma:

- ◆ Ten people a day die from asthma.
- ◆ Asthma affects more than 24.5 million Americans.
- ◆ More than 6 million children under the age of 18 have asthma.
- ◆ More than 50 million Americans have all types of allergies

How to Prevent Allergies & Asthma attacks:

- ◆ Know your triggers for asthma
- ◆ Avoid your allergens
- ◆ Carry your medication with you and take it as prescribed
- ◆ Shower at night to remove pollen from your head before you go to bed
- ◆ Get vaccinated for influenza and pneumonia

The Eastern Highlands Health District (EHHD) offers the [Putting on AIRS \(Asthma Indoor Risk Strategies\) program](#). It is a free program that helps you find what may be making your child's asthma worse. With your permission, staff from participating health districts will check your home for things that may start asthma attacks.

Be Well is an employee wellness program provided through the Eastern Highlands Health District with funding from The CT Department of Health. The goal of the program is to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

