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'Quit smoking to stub out stress'

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Smokers often say they need a cigarette to calm their nerves, but a new study suggests that after a person kicks the habit, chronic stress levels may go down.

The findings, say researchers, should give smokers reassurance that quitting will not deprive them of a valuable stress reliever.

In a study of 469 smokers who tried to quit after being hospitalized for heart disease, the researchers found that those who remained abstinent for a year showed a reduction in their perceived stress levels. In contrast, stress levels were essentially unchanged among heart patients who went back to smoking.

"Smokers often see cigarettes as a tool to manage stress, and ex-smokers sometimes return to smoking in the belief that this will help them cope with a stressful life event," lead researcher Peter Hajek, a professor at Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry in the UK, said. Yet, he said, non-smokers tend to report lower stress levels than smokers do. On the other hand, smoking itself may generate long-term stress.