



Cold turkey

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"**Cold turkey**" refers to the abrupt cessation of a substance dependence and the resulting unpleasant experience, as opposed to gradually easing the process through reduction over time or by using replacement medication. The term comes from the piloerection or "goose bumps" that occurs with abrupt withdrawal from opioids, which resembles the skin of a plucked refrigerated turkey.^{[1][2]}

Sudden withdrawal from drugs such as alcohol, benzodiazepines, and barbiturates can be extremely dangerous, leading to potentially fatal seizures. For long-term alcoholics, going cold turkey can cause life-threatening delirium tremens, rendering this an inappropriate method for breaking an alcohol addiction.^[3]

In the case of opioid withdrawal, going "cold turkey" is extremely unpleasant but less dangerous.^{[4][2]} Life-threatening issues are unlikely unless one has a pre-existing medical condition.^[2]

Smoking cessation methods advanced by J. Wayne McFarland and Elman J. Folkenburg (an M.D. and a pastor who wrote their Five Day Plan ca. 1959),^{[5][6]} Joel Spitzer and John R. Polito (smoking cessation educators)^[7] and Allen Carr (who founded Easyway during the early 1980s)^[8] are cold turkey plans.

Etymology

An early printed use of the term from 1920:

Some addicts voluntarily stop taking opiates and "suffer it out" as they express it without medical assistance, a process which in their slang is called taking "cold turkey"...

^[9]

Another early printed use of the term in the media to refer to drug withdrawal occurred in the *Daily Colonist* in British Columbia in 1921:

Perhaps the most pitiful figures who have appeared before Dr. Carleton Simon ... are those who voluntarily surrender themselves. When they go before him, that are given what is called the 'cold turkey' treatment.

The phrase "taking cold turkey" has also been reported during the 1920s as slang for pleading guilty.^[11]

The term is later seen in the 1947 novel *I, The Jury* by Mickey Spillane:

Included was a medical record from the hospital when he had made her go cold turkey, which is dope-addict talk for an all-out cure.

On February 26, 1951 Time magazine article "High & Light" used the phrase, stating:

There is one dimly hopeful side to the teenage dope problem. Unlike older people, few teenagers appear to take to drugs because of psychological troubles; youngsters usually start using narcotics either out of ignorance or the same reckless impulses which lead them to race hot rods. Though they are easier to wean, however, there are almost no facilities for taking care of them. On New York City's Rikers Island, youngsters have to endure the horrors of a sudden "cold turkey" cure or get none at all. Once released, many go right back to drugs again.

In early drug slang, the term "going cold turkey" was referred to suddenly and totally stopping drugs. The term is now used in general slang with the broader meaning of stopping any habit or practice suddenly.^[12]

There are several explanations of the phrase's origin:

- The "goose bumps" (piloerection) that occurs with sudden discontinuation in persons dependent on opioids, frequently persons addicted to heroin.^{[1][2]} Similarly the term "kick the habit" alludes to the muscle spasms that also occur.^[1]
- A narrowing of the meaning "suddenly or without preparation", from cold turkey being a dish that requires little preparation; originally used for heroin addicts.^[13]
- From the American phrase *talk turkey* meaning "to speak bluntly with little preparation".^[14]

In popular culture

Instances of the phrase's use in popular culture include:

Film

- Norman Lear's 1971 movie *Cold Turkey*, about a small town that gives up smoking to win \$25,000,000
- *French Connection II* (1975) had Gene Hackman's NYCPD Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle lead character suffering this after the drug ring he was pursuing captured him and forced heroin on him while keeping him prisoner.

- In *Trainspotting* (1996), Renton goes cold turkey after overdosing on heroin.

Television

- *Kojak* episode "Sweeter Than Life" has one of the title character's cousins going through cold turkey (1975)
- *Hollyoaks* "Episode 4429" sees cold turkey as the only plot with character *Ste Hay* (2016)
- *Wentworth* episode "Smitten" sees character *Allie Novak* going through cold turkey. (2016)

Music

- *John Lennon's* song "Cold Turkey" (1969), about giving up heroin
- *Green Day's* song "Hitchin' A Ride" (1997), main singer says "cold turkey's getting stale", in a hidden reference to the state^[15]
- *Cage's* song "This Place" (2013), wherein he sings: "I can't believe I made it out with so little damage/ Back then I thought **cold turkey** was a fuckin' sandwich"

Video games

- *Fallout 2* (post-apocalyptic cRPG, 1998): Myron mentions going cold turkey as the only cure for Jet addiction.

See also

- *Smoking cessation*
- *Drug withdrawal*

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