

Translated from *Rev Prescrire* June 2014; 34 (368): 405

Repeating the same mistake

It is easy to stop smoking... but giving up for good is difficult, whichever method is used. There are less traumatic methods but also more radical methods, such as abrupt removal of smoking paraphernalia (packets, rolling machines, lighters and ashtrays), and distancing oneself from friends who smoke and even one's old life. Other smokers turn to smoking cessation drugs. Among the drugs available, the best choice is *nicotine*, which has an acceptable harm-benefit balance. Although, as with other methods, it is easy to stop smoking, but...

The use of other smoking cessation drugs is more controversial. *Varenicline* falls into this category. It is more dangerous than *nicotine*. And with *varenicline* too, it is easy to stop smoking... but relapse is common.

The summary of product characteristics (SPC) for *varenicline* has been amended to encourage the use of a second course of *varenicline* for patients who have relapsed after a previous attempt to quit smoking with this drug (see p. 208). Does *varenicline* have

a better harm-benefit balance the second time around?

A comparative trial showed that during a second course of *varenicline*, it is easy to stop smoking... but no more so than the first time. In terms of harms, doubling the duration of exposure to the drug also doubles exposure to its serious adverse effects, such as myocardial infarction and suicide. *Varenicline* also provokes immune-mediated adverse effects, such as Stevens-Johnson syndrome, the incidence and severity of which may be increased by re-exposure, related to an increase in anti-*varenicline* antibodies.

The European Medicines Agency's decision to authorise a repeat course of *varenicline* for a second attempt at smoking cessation brings to mind the Latin expression: "*Errare humanum est, perseverare diabolicum*". Why persist in repeating the same mistake and expect a different result?

Especially since it is easy to stop smoking, but...

Prescrire