

# Getting rid of a bad habit using a four weeks plan

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Towards the end of senior year in high school, I formed an irritating habit where I chew the skin on the inside of my cheeks to the point where they're raw and bleeding. Sometimes it is to the point where I will use my fingers to get the skin in my mouth closer to my teeth so I can bite it. I want to change this habit of chewing because my mouth always feels unpleasant and there is a sense of discomfort when I swallow or chew food. My starting level of chewing is moderate; ideally, my goal would be to stop chewing my cheeks altogether because it's painful and this action doesn't benefit my life.

My four-week plan is designed to be relatively forgiving in the beginning, as I've tried stopping "cold turkey" before and it was more challenging than I expected. In the first week, I have allowed myself to accept "small bites" in my cheek because I seem to begin the act without noticing. It's the bigger bites that actually hurt and catch my attention that I won't be allowing. I'll snap my bracelet as a consequence for this action because the pain needs to be immediate when this much damage is done to my body. This would be considered a positive punishment because the bad behavior comes with extra consequences. By the start of the second week, there might be some loose skin and healing and minor damage to the inside of my mouth, but I will try to avoid it and keep my mouth busy. I bought gum to chew for any time that I feel I would need to bite on my cheek. I will also be bringing food to class. These two items will both act as distractors to keep myself occupied and away from damaging my mouth. As unappetizing as it may sound, there is always a new layer of skin in the morning so during my 8 am's is when I seem most prone to begin chewing. I've used the tactics mentioned in the podcast about habits; by the end of week two and beginning of week three, I

should be noticing, and hopefully resisting, the cue that makes me start chewing. Also by the beginning of week three, I should know what the reward is and why I persist in doing this action frequently everyday. By week four, in a perfect world, my chewing will have stopped and my mouth will be healed from the constant irritation. I'm using operant conditioning because as of right now, I'm not satisfied until I bite skin from my mouth. By using reinforcers and punishment, my goal is to shift the satisfaction to something else.

I've read online that people who chew on their cheeks could do so because they are stressed, so part of my cue would be to determine what is stressing me out if that is the reason behind my chewing habit. The snacks and gum will act as secondary-positive reinforcers and will hopefully modify my habit. Though snacks and gum are food, they are distractors and aren't biologically relevant to survival. By chewing on something else besides my cheeks, the gum or snacks will act as replacements and will patch the missing gap in my routine of chewing on something: I'll be replacing my unwanted behavior, chewing, with a more desirable item such as gum or a snack. I've told some of my friends and even one of my professors to yell at me if they see my face contorted or my hands assisting in the chewing of skin; they will act as positive punishment. If my professor calls me out for chewing on my cheeks, more people will notice which will most likely get me to stop.

Before making any drastic changes to my environment, my level of control over my habit is a 3 out of 10. I don't usually notice until it's already began and then I continue to chew regardless. My cheeks are sore and I've been chewing them minutes after I brush my teeth in the morning until I'm in bed

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trying to sleep. One of my friends even asked me, “ What are you doing with your hand?”. This question made me wonder if multiple people every day see me making contorted faces and using my hands to help chew on my cheeks. It honestly shouldn't be too hard to at least reduce some chewing because I seem to be doing it every moment of the day when I'm not eating or speaking.

I'm noting my chewing behavior three to four times a day, and am writing any major events that happen that make me begin chewing in the note section of my phone. I made it almost a day and a half before I chewed for the first time. I originally said that small bites would be allowed, but I was doing well and figured if I could go this long without breaking that any bite should be punished with a snap from my bracelet. I started chewing in my freshman seminar class. I began class by reading an essay I wrote for peer review. I figured that I would've chewed leading up to this, but the chewing didn't begin until I sat down and the entire class began to critique my paper. I caught this behavior almost immediately so I drank some water, but it didn't help. I was able to stop by eating a sugar cookie; I thought the cookie texture satisfied the desire to chew on something and replaced chewing on my cheek. This experience was how I found out that water is too bland to replace the desire to chew on my cheek and any positive reinforcers must have texture or be flavorful. I finished week one successfully without chewing temptations until Friday after dinner. That night was when my computer science midterm was due. I was stuck on the heaviest weighted question and the thought of turning it in unanswered or late was stressful.

This led me to believe my chewing was stressed-induced. My habit seemed controllable until something that put me outside of my comfort zone rose.

Over the course of weeks 2-4, many of the same occurrences as I saw in week one continued to happen. When studying for my French test, I felt in control until I separated my flash cards into two piles: the words I have memorized and the ones I continue to miss. I kept forgetting the definitions or spellings to about 15 terms and I was getting angry. While I stared at the cards at my desk, I noticed I was resting my chin on my hand while inadvertently using my hand to chew on my cheeks. Before this occurrence, I had lasted nearly 6 days without chewing. I concluded that my cue was stress after the second unit test in psychology. I wasn't as stressed while studying for this test because I did well on the first one. However, I noticed that during the test that I was chewing on my cheeks. The combination of being short on time, not knowing every answer completely, and knowing the weight of the exam was arduous. It's as if my mind knew I was stressed before I acknowledged it. My reward was getting a small piece of skin off my cheeks and chewing on it. It seems that it would bring relief for 10-20 minutes. The food worked, but it didn't work as well as chewing on my cheeks did. It's as if I wasn't stressed at first because the test was a fixed interval that I knew was coming and that I thought I would ace. However, I noticed upon sitting down that this was nearing an example of a variable interval because I didn't realize the content of the exam was going to be more difficult than the last test.

For the duration of the four weeks, I believe my actions and efforts were fairly successful. Before my conditioning plan, I was chewing on the start and <https://assignbuster.com/getting-rid-of-a-bad-habit-using-a-four-weeks-plan/>

end of every day. After the implementation of the plan, I began to notice every time I made an attempt to chew on my cheeks and I started to realize why this was happening. Miscellaneous chewing stopped quickly and there were streaks of 5-7 days where no chewing occurred. I feel confident now that I know the cue. Next time I anticipate an event to be nerve wracking, I will try to stop any thoughts that would lead me to want to begin chewing. If I am able to convince myself that something isn't as bad as it seems, there could be a decrease in my aptitude to start chewing. I hope to notice and stop any chewing that is pointless, but when a stressful event arises, I won't be as hard on myself.

The most effective parts of this plan were eating textured foods or drinking flavorful drinks. I noticed that Chex Mix worked well as a positive reinforcer, as did Gatorade and Brisk Iced Tea. Water didn't satisfy any needs of mine because of its insipidity. By having a drink every time I chewed on my cheeks, there was a constant reminder that chewing my skin is useless and there are better things to resort to. I think the reinforcers helped get the chewing under control while the punishments had less of an effect on how often I chewed my cheeks. By drinking the flavorful drinks, it was a direct positive outcome on my body. I was drinking something that tasted good and it was immediately stopping the bad behavior.

Some of the weaker parts of my plan were using gum and snapping my bracelet. I noticed that I was chewing my cheeks and the bubble gum simultaneously at some points. The positive punishment wasn't working well because I got bored of snapping my bracelet at times because the pain wasn't too high or distractible and it was easy to get used to. Next time I  
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could use a rubber band because the pain level can be increased by stretching it further making this change more immediate and unpleasant. Another thing that I noticed was that the healing process of my cheeks was when I was most prone to chew on them. After around two days, they heal and the temptation decreases a lot. My self-control has improved a fair amount during this experience and I believe that eradicating this habit is possible once I stop resorting to chewing on my cheeks the second something gets difficult.