Describe and evaluate the learning approach to smoking addiction (9 marks)

Nicotine addiction is a learned behaviour which involves smokers being rewarded through positive reinforcement. This is where the individual gains pleasure from the behaviour of smoking which results in the behaviour being repeated. Social learning theory suggest that the rewards associated with smoking could be due to direct reinforcement from others. Operant conditioning plays a role as the initiation of smoking might be encouraged by others. Classical conditioning states that an association has been made between smoking and a good mood. Operant conditioning suggests that the reward element of smoking is responsible for maintaining the behaviour. Negative reinforcement can be seen in withdrawal symptoms. Cue reactivity can increase maintenance of the smoking behaviour through ritualised behaviour e.g. seeing a pub. Self-efficacy determines if someone maintains smoking. Classical conditioning and operant conditioning states that the cues are still present even if the person gives up smoking e.g. meeting a friend. There is a physiological craving for nicotine and therefore people will smoke to remove withdrawal symptoms.

A strength of the learning approach to smoking addiction is that it has helped to develop effective treatments. Aversion therapy has been used to treat smoking behaviour. This is where a negative stimulus e.g. a drug that induces sickness (emetic drug) is paired with smoking behaviour. After multiple pairings, the smoking behaviour becomes extinct as the person associates smoking with sickness. This is a strength because it has helped people to overcome their addiction and become healthier. It also saves the NHS money because they will no longer have to spend further money on treatments for smoking related issues.

A weakness of the learning approach to smoking addiction is that cognitive approaches state that smoking is due to irrational thoughts and this is not considered in the learning approach. The cognitive approach has suggested that smoking is based on the irrational thought processes of the smoker, for example believing that smoking improves concentration and therefore does not support either learning or biological explanations. This is a weakness because the cognitive explanation focuses on the expectation and beliefs in cognitive processes. It ignores biological factors e.g. reward pathways.

The learning approach can explain smoking addiction because it operates the initiation phase when the person first begins to smoke, the maintenance phase where the behaviour of smoking becomes a habit and then the relapse phase when they try to give up but because their learned behaviour is now associated with pleasure, they find it difficult. These three phases have allowed for effective treatments to successfully work however cognitive explanations have also helped to develop successful therapies e.g. cognitive behavioural therapies to treat the underlying issues that may start the initiation of smoking.