A drug that helps alcoholics and heroin addicts kick their habits might also help female smokers quit, according to a University of Chicago study.

The drug -- naltrexone -- worked better for women than for men, perhaps because it reduced the chance they would gain weight after quitting, the study found. Earlier studies found potential weight gain presents a bigger obstacle to women who want to quit.

Only slight weight gain seen
In the first month after quitting, women who took naltrexone gained about one pound, while women who took an inactive placebo pill gained about four pounds.

Researchers studied 110 adults who smoked 15 to 40 cigarettes a day and had failed multiple attempts to quit. For two months, half took a daily naltrexone pill and half took a placebo. All received nicotine patches and behavioral therapy.

After two months, 58 percent of the women who took naltrexone had quit successfully, compared with only 39 percent who took the placebo. Among men, naltrexone showed no better results than the placebo. After six months, only about one-third of all participants had quit for good.

The study by Andrea King and colleagues is published in the journal Nicotine and Tobacco Research.

Several smoking-cessation drugs already are available, including nicotine-replacement patches, gums, lozenges, nasal sprays and pills, and the antidepressant Zyban. Success rates range from 20 percent to 40 percent, King said.

But is it marketable?
Naltrexone might become an option for smokers who don't respond to existing smoking-cessation drugs or who don't like the side effects.

Naltrexone appears to inhibit chemical signals in the brain that convey a pleasurable feeling when taking drugs. In some smokers, naltrexone reduces craving, irritability, fatigue and difficulty concentrating.

"It's a safe, well-tolerated medication," King said.

It's unclear whether naltrexone will be marketed for smoking cessation. Any company can sell naltrexone as a generic. And with no patent protection, companies have little incentive to develop it further.

King is conducting a followup study that will track 324 smokers for one year. Call (773) 834-8654 or visit http://stopsmoking.uchicago.edu.

jriter@suntimes.com