

Smokeless Tobacco: NOT a Great American Smokeout

There are two main types of smokeless tobacco: chewing tobacco and snuff. Chewing tobacco traditionally is sold in loose leaf, plug, or twist form. A portion is placed between the cheek and lower gum for sucking or chewing. This sucking and chewing allows nicotine to be absorbed into the bloodstream through the tissues in the mouth. Snuff is a moist or dry tobacco that is finely ground or shredded. A small amount is pinched or dipped and placed between the cheek and lower gum. Although some of the nicotine is swallowed as excess saliva forms, a hefty dose of nicotine is delivered right into the bloodstream through absorption. Both forms of smokeless tobacco require some spitting to rid the mouth of the accumulated saliva and moist tobacco. The spit is brown and smelly from the mixture of saliva, nicotine, and additives in the tobacco.

The First Myth: Smokeless Tobacco Is "Safer"

Smokeless tobacco is perceived as being "safer" than cigarettes because, after all, it's not smoking, and everyone knows smoking is very bad for you. Yes, there are over 4,000 known chemicals in smoked tobacco, and only 2,000 chemicals in smokeless tobacco products, but they are not safer. Most of those 2,000 chemicals are cancer-causing agents. Smokeless tobacco use is linked to many kinds of cancer and primarily to oral cancer. It is estimated that three-quarters of mouth and throat cancers are caused by smokeless tobacco use. These cancers are highly malignant; the survival rate five years after diagnosis is only 50%.

The Second Myth: Smokeless Tobacco Isn't as Addictive

Another misperception is that smokeless tobacco isn't as addictive as smoking. A pinch of snuff or a chew of tobacco held in the mouth for 30 minutes has the same effect as smoking three to four cigarettes in the same amount of time. Because of the greater and faster delivery of nicotine in smokeless tobacco, there is a higher potential for addiction in smokeless tobacco than in smoked tobacco.

The Third Myth: The Use of Smokeless Tobacco Is Declining

Most consumers associate chewing tobacco with comic backwoods characters and bad guys in Westerns. The dipping of snuff conjures up dainty gentlemen of the George Washington era. Then there is major league baseball where chewing tobacco was popular for decades, and we all know what a spitball is even though it has been banned from the sport since the 1920's. The third misperception is that smokeless tobacco is declining portion of overall tobacco use.

Children Are Being Targeted

So who uses these products in this day and age? Children. Large numbers of them. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 20% of high school boys and 2% of high school girls use smokeless tobacco. Of the 12 to 14 million users in this country, one-third are under the age of 21. More than half of these developed the habit before they were thirteen. An estimated 3% of middle school students use smokeless tobacco.



Smokeless Tobacco: NOT a Great American Smokeout, cont.

Children Are Being Targeted, cont.

And therein lies the problem: advertisements and promotions for smokeless tobacco products often link them to macho activities like sports. Children are buying the myths that smokeless tobacco enhances athletic performance, is a safe form of tobacco, and is not addictive. Besides that, it doesn't smell up your clothes and hair, and you can sneak it into school. No one knows you've got it.

To further attract young users, tobacco companies deliberately sell smokeless tobacco products with flavors and sweeteners. Additives such as sugar, cherry juice concentrate, apple juice, chocolate liqueur or honey are used in various smokeless tobacco products. The nasty stuff tastes much better, and young users can get hooked after only a few tries. Smokeless tobacco usage trends among young people indicate that beginners go for the flavored varieties and eventually graduate to products with higher nicotine levels as their addiction progresses.

Congress enacted the Comprehensive Smokeless Tobacco Health Education Act in 1986, which requires the rotation of three health warnings on smokeless tobacco packages and advertisements. Smokeless tobacco advertising was also banned from radio and television. It is also illegal to sell any form of tobacco to anyone under the age of eighteen, yet children are getting the products and using them.

If you suspect your child is using any kind of tobacco, get serious about helping them quit. Over 90% of tobacco users in this country admit to beginning their addictions before the age of 19. Nicotine addiction alone is considered as difficult to break as addictions to morphine and cocaine. It certainly is not a passing phase for children to "play around" with tobacco.

For more information on smokeless tobacco, please visit:

<http://www.drugfreesport.com/choices/drugs/street/tobacco.html>
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Tobacco/smokeless/>
http://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/tcrb/less_effects.html