

Smokeless Tobacco: As Dangerous as Smoked Tobacco

New users of smokeless tobacco often believe their habit is safer than smoking tobacco because dangerous chemicals and carbon monoxide aren't being inhaled into the lungs. This belief is false. Although chemical analysis of smokeless tobacco indicates that there are only 2,000 chemicals in its composition compared to 4,000 in smoked tobacco, many of those chemicals can cause cancer. The highest health risk to these users is oral cancer of the mouth, larynx, and pharynx. Seventy percent of smokeless tobacco users develop mouth sores. These mouth sores can become cancerous. Studies indicate that the risk of oral cancer is fifty times greater for users of smokeless tobacco than in those who do not. Surgery is usually necessary, and it can be both painful and progressive, with large portions of the soft tissue of the mouth and throat being removed in successive surgeries. These cancers are highly malignant; the survival rate five years after diagnosis is only 50%.

Types of Smokeless Tobacco

Chewing tobacco and snuff are the two types of smokeless tobacco. Chewing tobacco is sold in loose leaf, plug, or twist form, and the user places a small amount between the cheek and lower gum for sucking or chewing. Snuff, a moist or dry tobacco that is finely ground or shredded, is pinched or dipped and placed between the cheek and lower gum. With both kinds of tobacco, a hefty dose of nicotine is delivered right into the bloodstream through absorption. The delivery of nicotine to the body is comparable to smoking three cigarettes in a 30-minute period.

Health Issues

Smokeless tobacco users generally have bad breath and yellow-brown stains on the teeth. Cracked and bleeding gums and lips, receding gums, loose teeth or tooth loss are also prevalent. Because of the grit and sugar found in smokeless tobacco, tooth decay is a major problem. But that's only the beginning of the kinds of health problems associated with smokeless tobacco use.

Nicotine is as addictive as cocaine or heroin, and the smokeless tobacco user is as addicted as a cigarette smoker. In fact, nicotine blood levels in smokeless tobacco users are similar to those of smokers. Although it is not delivered through the lungs, the nicotine is delivered directly to the cardiovascular system through the contact with moist mouth tissues. The entire cardiovascular system reacts to the nicotine, beginning with increased heart rate and blood pressure. Blood vessels are constricted, and oxygen delivery throughout the body is compromised. Athletic performance and endurance are decreased by this reaction. Long-term exposure to nicotine puts the oxygen-starved heart at risk for acute cardiac ischemia, angina pectoris (severe chest pain), and heart attacks. The chronic constriction of blood vessels can lead to blood clots.

The gastrointestinal system comes under assault as well. Nicotine, tar, and many of those 2,000 cancer-causing chemicals are swallowed with saliva. Ulcers can be a problem. Recent studies indicate that many of the health problems associated with cigarette smoking also are linked to smokeless tobacco use. These include impotence in males, infertility in females, high cholesterol, and cancers of the stomach, intestines, and bladder.



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If you continue to use, you need to watch for potential problems, particularly in the mouth and throat. Smokeless tobacco users should have frequent dental check-ups to screen for pre-cancerous lesions and other problems. Users should alert their physicians to their tobacco use so that periodic checks for other problems can be scheduled. Quitting any tobacco use is an important step to regaining health and vitality. Dentists and physicians can help with cessation plans and medications. Contacting the free South Dakota QuitLine is a smart idea. The toll free number is 1-866-SD QUIT (1-866-737-8487). The South Dakota QuitLine can help with information, coaching, discounts on nicotine withdrawal products, and free professional advice.

For more information on the dangers of smokeless tobacco, please visit:
http://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/tcrb/less_effects.html
<http://www.quit tobacco.com/facts/effects.htm>
<http://www.befreesd.com>