Smokeless Tobacco and Health Risks

Many different terms are used to describe smokeless tobacco products, including: dip, chew, spit, oral and spitless tobacco and dry and moist snuff (snus). Many people mistakenly think smokeless tobacco is a safe alternative to cigarettes.

The facts about smokeless tobacco:

- It is just as addictive as cigarette smoking.
- One can of snuff contains the same amount of nicotine as 4 packs of cigarettes.
- Dipping 8 to 10 times a day introduces as much nicotine into the body as smoking 30-40 cigarettes.
- The amount of nicotine in the bloodstream after using smokeless tobacco may be higher than that of a cigarette smoker because nicotine is easily and quickly absorbed through the lining of the mouth.
- Nicotine stays in the bloodstream longer with smokeless tobacco than with cigarettes.

Oral tobacco contains at least 28 chemicals known to cause cancer (carcinogens). The most harmful of these are tobacco-specific nitrosamines, which are known to cause lung cancer. The juice from smokeless tobacco causes sores and white patches (called leukoplakia) in the mouth that can lead to cancer. People who use smokeless tobacco have a higher risk of cancers of the mouth, throat (pharynx), esophagus (swallowing tube from the throat to the stomach), stomach, and pancreas. Other effects of using spit tobacco include chronic bad breath, stained teeth and fillings, gum disease, tooth decay and loss, and break-down of bone in the jaw. Studies show that users of smokeless tobacco also have an increased risk of heart disease, heart attacks, and stroke.

Smokeless tobacco products are not a safe alternative to smoking. Studies have shown that those who switch from cigarette smoking to chewing tobacco were more than 2.5 times as likely to develop cancer of the mouth or throat compared to those who quit smoking all together. Furthermore, those who switch from cigarette smoking to chewing tobacco are 5-6 times more likely to develop cancer than non-smokers.

Learn more about the dangers of smokeless tobacco from the Oral Cancer Foundation, the National Cancer Institute and the American Cancer Society.

Learn more

- Smokeless tobacco around the world
- Are you ready to quit smokeless tobacco?
- Quitting smokeless tobacco
- Symptoms of withdrawal from smokeless tobacco
- Resources for Quitting
- Life after tobacco

Smokeless tobacco around the world

The types of cancer people are at risk for from smokeless tobacco varies around the world. This is because the type of tobacco product used and what is mixed with it varies. For example, in Middle Eastern countries (India and Sudan), many chewing tobaccos are prepared with betel quid or areca nut, which are both known to be carcinogens. As a result there is an increased risk for cancers of the mouth and throat in this area of the world. Studies in Asia and Africa have shown an increased risk of mouth, throat, and esophagus cancer in users of smokeless tobacco. Nordic and Northern European countries have an increased risk of esophagus and pancreas cancers due to the use of smokeless tobacco. In Sweden and Norway, snus, which a type of moist snuff made with air-cured tobacco, water, salt and flavorings, is the most common form of smokeless tobacco.
Snus may have lower levels of carcinogens than other types of snuff, but is still linked to cancer.

**Are you ready to quit smokeless tobacco?**

So you think you are ready to quit smokeless tobacco? Great - that is the first step to success! What are your personal motivations to quit? Write them down and refer to them when things get tough. Quitting is not easy, but you are not alone - many people want to quit and many are successful. Surveys show that most people who use snuff or chew would like to quit. Find a community (there are a few online specific for smokeless tobacco) or a buddy that has been successful to be your support person to call upon during tough times.

There are several reasons why quitting is important. First and most importantly, quitting will improve your health and lower your chances of developing a tobacco-related cancer or heart disease. Your risk of these diseases decreases the longer you stay off smokeless tobacco. A tobacco habit is costly, and by quitting you will have extra money to put towards other things. Mouth sores will heal soon after quitting, and you will be rid of the bad breath and stained teeth. The stains from tobacco juice on your clothes and in your car will be a thing of the past. Additionally, you will be setting a good example to those around you, especially if you have children in your life.

**Quitting smokeless tobacco**

Quitting smokeless tobacco is like quitting any addiction. Nicotine is a highly addictive substance and quitting involves dealing with the physical, mental and emotional components of this addiction. Talk with your healthcare provider for suggestions and support while you quit. Visit online support sites to learn ways to avoid or deal with common stumbling points. For smokeless tobacco users, there may be a greater need to find an oral substitute to take the place of the tobacco such as sugarless candy or gum.

**Symptoms of withdrawal from smokeless tobacco**

Stopping or cutting back on smokeless tobacco use causes symptoms of nicotine withdrawal that are much like those smokers get when they quit. Withdrawal from nicotine is both physical and mental. Physically, the body is reacting to the absence of nicotine. Mentally and emotionally, an individual is faced with giving up an addiction, which calls for a major change in behavior. Both the physical and mental factors must be dealt with to quit and stay quit.

Those who have used tobacco regularly for a few weeks or longer, and suddenly stop or greatly reduce the amount used will often have withdrawal symptoms. Symptoms usually start within a few hours of the last dip or chew and get worse about 2 to 3 days later when most of the nicotine and its by-products are out of the body. The following are withdrawal symptoms that you may experience: dizziness (which may last 1 or 2 days after quitting), depression, feelings of frustration, impatience, and anger, anxiety, irritability, trouble sleeping (including trouble falling asleep and staying asleep, and having bad dreams or even nightmares), trouble concentrating, restlessness, headaches, tiredness and increased appetite.

Withdrawal symptoms can last for a few days to up to several weeks. These uncomfortable feelings can lead you to start using tobacco, but remember: They will get better every day that you stay tobacco-free! Nicotine replacement products and other medications can help you get through the tough times. There are wonderful resources available online and in the community - learn more from the resources for quitting below.

**Resources for Quitting**

Quitting tobacco is not easy, but you can do it! Whether you’re a smoker or someone who uses smokeless tobacco, to have the best chance of quitting and staying quit, you need to know what you’re up against, what your options are, and where to go for help. Below are some resources that will help you.

**Smoking cessation. Where do I start?**

Start here for help in creating a quit plan, tips to coping with common obstacles and resources for support and smoking cessation programs.

There are several websites specifically for smokeless tobacco users. These include:
**Oral Health America**  
**Kill the Can**  
**My Last Dip**  
**Smoking Cessation Aids**: This article reviews the available treatments, both pharmacologic (drug) and non-pharmacologic, to aid in successful smoking and tobacco use cessation.

**Life After Tobacco**

Unfortunately, quitting tobacco cannot completely erase the damage done by months or years of use. You should always be honest with healthcare providers about your smoking history and be aware of the risks associated with this history.

As recommended by the American Cancer Society, you should tell your healthcare provider about any of the following symptoms:

- Any change in a cough (for example, you cough up more phlegm or mucus than usual)
- A new cough
- Coughing up blood
- Hoarseness
- Trouble breathing
- Wheezing
- Chest pain
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Feeling tired all the time (fatigue)
- Frequent lung or respiratory infections (like pneumonia or bronchitis)
- Development of sores, red areas, or white patches in your mouth.

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