

Smokeless Tobacco

Guidelines for Teens



What is smokeless tobacco?

There are two forms of smokeless tobacco: chewing tobacco and snuff. Chewing tobacco is usually sold as leaf tobacco (packaged in a pouch) or plug tobacco (in brick form) that is put between the cheek and gum. Users keep chewing tobacco in their mouths for several hours to get a continuous buzz from the nicotine in the tobacco.

Snuff is a powdered tobacco (usually sold in cans) that is put between the lower lip and gum. Just a pinch is all that is needed to release the nicotine, which is then swiftly absorbed into the bloodstream, resulting in a quick high. Sounds harmless, right? Keep reading . . .

What is in smokeless tobacco?

Chemicals. Keep in mind that the smokeless tobacco you or your friends are using contains many chemicals that can be harmful to your health. Here are a few of the ingredients found in smokeless tobacco:

- Nicotine (addictive drug)
- Polonium 210 (nuclear waste)
- Cadmium (used in car batteries)
- N-Nitrosamines (cancer-causing)
- Lead (poison)
- Formaldehyde (embalming fluid)

The nicotine contained in smokeless tobacco is what gives the user a buzz. It also makes it very hard to quit. Why? Because every time you use smokeless tobacco your body gets used to the nicotine; it actually starts to crave it. Craving is one of the signs of addiction, or dependence.

Your body also adjusts to the amount of tobacco you need to chew to get a buzz. Pretty soon you will need a little more tobacco to get the same feeling. This process is called tolerance, which is another sign of addiction.

Some people say smokeless tobacco is okay because there is no smoke like a cigarette has. Do not believe them. It is not a safe alternative to smoking. You just move health problems from your lungs to your mouth.

Physical and mental effects of smokeless tobacco

If you use smokeless tobacco, here is what you might have to look forward to:

- **Cancer.** Cancer of the mouth (including the lip, tongue, and cheek) and throat. Cancers usually occur at the spot in the mouth where the tobacco is held. The surgery for cancer of the mouth could lead to removal of parts of your face, tongue, cheek, or lip.
- **Leukoplakia.** When you hold tobacco in one place in your mouth, your mouth becomes irritated by the tobacco juice. This causes a white, leathery-like patch to form, and this is called leukoplakia. These patches can be different in size, shape, and appearance. They are also considered precancerous: If you find one in your mouth, see your doctor immediately.

- **Heart Disease.** The constant flow of nicotine into your body causes many side effects including increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, and sometimes irregular heart beats. Nicotine in the body also causes constricted blood vessels that can slow down reaction time and cause dizziness—not a good move if you play sports.
- **Gum and Tooth Disease.** Smokeless tobacco permanently discolors teeth. Chewing tobacco causes halitosis (BAD BREATH). Its direct and repeated contact with the gums cause them to recede, which can cause your teeth to become loose. Smokeless tobacco contains a lot of sugar which, when mixed with the plaque on your teeth, forms acid that eats away at tooth enamel and causes cavities and chronic painful sores.
- **Social Effects.** Having really bad breath, discolored teeth, and gunk stuck in your teeth and constant spitting can have a very negative effect on your social life.

What if I want to quit?

You have just read the bad news, but here is the good news. Even though it is very difficult to quit chewing tobacco, it can be done. Read the following Tips to Quit for some helpful ideas to kick the habit. Remember, most people do not start chewing on their own, so do not try quitting on your own. Ask for help and positive reinforcement from your doctor, friends, parents, coaches, teachers, whomever . . .

Check for early warning signs of oral cancer

Check your mouth often, looking closely at the places where you hold the tobacco. See your doctor right away if you have any of the following:

- a sore that bleeds easily and does not heal
- a lump or thickening anywhere in your mouth or neck
- soreness or swelling that does not go away
- a red or white patch that does not go away
- trouble chewing, swallowing, or moving your tongue or jaw

Even if you do not find a problem today, if you are still using smokeless tobacco be sure to have your mouth checked at every routine doctor or dentist visit. Your chances for a cure are higher if oral cancer is found early.

Tips to Quit

Many smokeless tobacco users say it is even harder to quit smokeless tobacco than cigarettes. Chewing tobacco and snuff contain nicotine and are addictive. A recent study showed that the amount of nicotine in the bloodstream was actually twice as great for smokeless tobacco as for cigarettes. Trying to quit can be difficult, but not impossible. Here are some tips to spit it out and keep it out!

- 1. Think of reasons why you want to quit.** You may want to quit because:
 - You do not like having bad breath after chewing and dipping.
 - You do not want stained teeth.
 - You do not want to risk getting cancer.
 - You do not like being addicted to nicotine.
 - You want to start leading a healthier life.
 - The people around you find it offensive.
 - You do not want to waste your money.
- 2. Pick a quit date and throw out all your chewing tobacco and snuff.**
- 3. Ask your friends, family, teachers, and coaches to help you kick the habit by giving you support and encouragement.** Tell friends not to offer you smokeless tobacco. You may want to ask a friend to quit with you.

- 4. Ask your doctor about a tobacco quitting program.** These include nicotine chewing gum, a nicotine patch you wear on your arm (if you are old enough), and special support groups.
- 5. Find alternatives to smokeless tobacco.** A few good examples are sugarless gum, pumpkin or sunflower seeds, or apple slices.
- 6. Find activities to keep your mind off of smokeless tobacco.** You could work on a hobby, listen to music, or talk to a friend. Getting into exercise, such as bike riding, running, in-line skating, or cross-country skiing, also can help relieve any tension caused by quitting.
- 7. Remember that everyone is different, so develop a personalized plan that works best for you.** Set realistic goals so you will be more likely to achieve them.
- 8. Reward yourself.** You could save the money that would have been spent on smokeless tobacco and buy something nice for yourself.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

