Chewing tobacco risks [1]

Alice,

My dad uses tobacco — the type you "dip" or put in between the cheek and gum and spit out. I am trying to get him to stop and need some solid facts about the harm this type of tobacco use can do to the body. There is lots of information out there on smoking, but I am having a hard time finding information on this. Please help!

—Concerned Son

Answer

Dear Concerned Son,

Your dad is lucky to have a son who is so concerned about his health. Encouraging a friend or family member to quit using an addictive substance can be difficult, so be patient if your dad doesn’t respond favorably right away. In addition to talking with your father about the health risks of chewing tobacco, you might also want to share with him some of the tobacco cessation resources listed below.

Smokeless tobacco (a.k.a., chewing tobacco, oral tobacco, spit or spitting tobacco, dip, chew, snuff, and snus) come in two different forms:

- **Chewing tobacco** — This type comes as loose leaves, plugs, or in twist form.
- **Snuff** — This type is more finely cut (and in some cases is powdered) and it sometimes comes with flavors scents or flavors. It’s available in a variety of forms: loose (moist or dry), lozenges, or in small tea-bag-like pouches.

Smokeless tobacco has several health risks including cancer, and it’s not a safe substitute for cigarette smoking. There are no safe forms of tobacco. The National Cancer Institute [2] states there are approximately 28 chemicals in smokeless tobacco that can cause cancer. Also, according to the American Cancer Society [3], people who use smokeless tobacco have a higher chance of developing oral and throat cancer than people who don't use tobacco. Users of
Smokeless tobacco are also at higher risk for developing pancreatic cancer. Smokeless tobacco can also cause white sores called leukoplakia [4] to develop in the mouth (these may eventually lead to cancer).

Apart from cancer, dipping has several other health consequences. Tobacco contains nicotine, an addictive substance which can cause chemical dependence. Chemical dependence makes it difficult for folks to quit using tobacco even when they are aware of the possible health consequences. Increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, and the levels of nicotine in the blood of smokeless tobacco users are similar to those of cigarette smokers. Using smokeless tobacco can also lead to oral health problems including gingivitis, gum recession, tooth loss, yellowed teeth, and bad breath. Finally, while this may not impact your father, Concerned Son, in pregnant women, heavy metals like lead and cadmium in smokeless tobacco can cause infant birth defects.


Talking with your dad about the health risks of using smokeless tobacco is a good first step in helping him quit. However, even if your dad is highly motivated, fighting a nicotine addiction can be an uphill battle. With your support and encouragement, hopefully your father can kick his dipping habit. Good luck to both of you!

Alice!

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