

An Oral Health America Program



What you need to know

Spit Tobacco Facts

Spit tobacco (a.k.a. smokeless tobacco, dip, snuff, chew, and chewing tobacco) contains ingredients that can cause serious health problems. Users can suffer from periodontal (gum) disease, cavities (tooth decay), leukoplakia (white patches and oral lesions which can lead to oral cancer), and are at greater risk for oral, throat, stomach and pancreatic cancer.

The nicotine content in a can of dip or snuff is approximately 144 milligrams, which is equal to about 80 cigarettes. In other words, one can of snuff or dip equals about four packs of cigarettes. Nicotine addiction is a serious physiological health issue that drives users to continue using, despite considerable risks (such as cancer), and makes spit tobacco a very difficult habit to quit. NSTEP has worked with a number of well known athletes and others who are unable to quit, even when they desperately want to stop using, and are experiencing significant health problems. Potential and new users should not underestimate the amount of nicotine contained in spit tobacco and the addictive nature of spit tobacco products.

NSTEP has also heard stories of adults giving spit tobacco to children and youth, often during sporting events and outdoor activities. It is illegal to sell spit tobacco products to children under 18 years of age. Parents and caretakers should realize the full impact of sharing this drug with young people, especially given the harmful health effects and addictive nature. Many, including NSTEP spokesperson (and former user) Gruen Von Behrens, have reported an almost immediate addiction to spit tobacco as a teenager.

What's in tobacco

Nicotine

Nicotine is the main ingredient in spit tobacco. It is the substance in smokeless tobacco to which users can become addicted. Though we usually associate nicotine with cigarettes, the amount of nicotine in one dip, or chew, of spit tobacco can deliver up to 5 times the amount found in one cigarette. For example, a thirty-minute chew gives you the same amount of nicotine as three cigarettes and a two can/week snuff dipper delivers the same nicotine as a 1 1/2 pack-a-day cigarette habit.

Nicotine is highly addictive, which means that spit tobacco users quickly find themselves physically and psychologically dependent on the drug. Spit tobacco manufacturers determine the amount of nicotine in their products. By manipulating a product's pH level, manufacturers can control the amount of nicotine absorbed by the user.

Evidence suggests that the tobacco companies market flavored tobacco products, which contain mere traces of nicotine, to entice young people to try tobacco. After introducing these starters, however, tobacco companies begin aggressively to push products that deliver higher levels of nicotine. In this way, the companies are able to increase users' dependence on spit tobacco. A spit tobacco addict will suffer withdrawal from nicotine when he or she tries to quit using. Stress, irritability, sleep problems, cravings, appetite increase, and stomach and intestinal disorders are common in people trying to quit tobacco use.

A colorless, poisonous alkaloid, derived from the tobacco plant, nicotine is also used as an insecticide.

Carcinogens

A cancer-causing substance or agent. A carcinogen is a substance that causes cancer. Spit tobacco contains 28 known carcinogens. These include formaldehyde, nickel, polonium-210, and nitrosamines. Dip, or moist snuff, has the highest levels of nitrosamines - up to 100 times the level lawfully permitted in regulated products like bacon or beer. According to the American Cancer Society, spit tobacco users are 50 times more likely than non-users to contract cancers of the cheek, gums, and inner surface of the lips.

Here's how spit tobacco causes oral cancer: as tissue cells in these areas divide in an attempt to form a barrier against the tobacco, they are exposed to carcinogenic agents and can become cancerous. Pinpointing how long a spit tobacco user can chew or dip before getting oral cancer is difficult to do since it is impossible to predict when and if cells will become cancerous. Consequently, spit tobacco users risk oral cancer every time they use.

Spit tobacco can also cause other types of cancers. Exposure to tobacco juice can induce cancers of the esophagus, larynx, stomach, pancreas, and prostate.

Sodium

A soft, light, extremely malleable silver-white metallic element that reacts explosively with water, sodium is naturally abundant in combined forms, especially in common salt, and is used in the production of a wide variety of industrially important compounds. Spit tobacco contains high concentrations of salt, which contributes to high blood pressure. Users have a higher risk of heart disease, hypertension, and heart attacks.

Sugar

A sweet crystalline or powdered substance, white when pure, consisting of sucrose obtained mainly from sugar cane and sugar beets and used in many foods, drinks, and medicines to improve their taste. Spit tobacco users are at increased risk for cavities due to the amount of sugar added to spit tobacco products during processing.