

Smokeless Tobacco

If You Chew...Quit

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Smokeless tobacco use in the United States continues to increase each year. It may be smokeless, but it isn't harmless. Why should you care? Keep reading.

Tooth abrasion

Grit and sand in smokeless tobacco products scratches teeth and wears away the hard surface or enamel. Premature loss of tooth enamel can cause added sensitivity and may require corrective treatment.

Increased tooth decay

Sugar is added to smokeless tobacco during the curing and processing to improve its taste. The bacteria found in plaque, the colorless, sticky film that forms daily on teeth, use this sugar to produce acid. The acid damages tooth enamel and leads to decay.

Gum recession

Constant irritation to the spot in the mouth where a small wad of chewing tobacco is placed can result in permanent damage to periodontal tissue. It also can damage the supporting bone structure. The injured gums pull away from the teeth, exposing root surfaces and leaving teeth sensitive to temperature and especially vulnerable to decay. Erosion of critical bone support leads to loosened teeth that can be permanently lost.

Nicotine dependence

Nicotine blood levels achieved by smokeless tobacco use are similar to those from cigarette smoking. Nicotine is a highly addictive substance that produces withdrawal symptoms when use is discontinued. Nicotine constricts the blood vessels that are necessary to carry oxygen-rich blood throughout the body. This raises both heart rate and blood pressure and increases the risk for heart disease. Additionally, athletic performance and endurance levels are decreased by this reaction.

Tooth discoloration and bad breath

Common traits of long-term smokeless tobacco users are stained teeth and bad breath. Moreover, the habit of continually spitting can be both unsightly and unpleasant.

Unhealthy eating habits

Chewing tobacco lessens a person's sense of taste and ability to smell. As a result, users tend to eat more salty and sweet foods, both of which are harmful if consumed in excess.

Oral cancer

With the practice of "chewing" and "dipping," tobacco and its irritating juices are left in contact with gums, cheeks and/or lips for prolonged periods of time. This can result in a pre-cancerous condition called leukoplakia. Leukoplakia appears either as a smooth, white patch or as leathery-looking wrinkled skin that may become cancerous over time.

Other cancers

All forms of smokeless tobacco contain high concentrations of cancer-causing agents. These substances subject users to increased cancer risk not only of the mouth, but also the throat, larynx and esophagus

Danger signs

If you use smokeless tobacco, or have in the past, you should be on the lookout for some of these early signs of oral cancer:

- A sore that does not heal
- A lump or white patch
- A prolonged sore throat
- Difficulty in chewing
- Restricted movement of the tongue or jaws
- A feeling of something in the throat

Pain is rarely an early symptom. For this reason, all tobacco users need regular dental check-ups.

You can find help quitting chew tobacco with the American Cancer Society's [Guide to Quitting Smokeless Tobacco](#).