



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF OTOLARYNGOLOGY- HEAD AND NECK SURGERY

Expert ENT Q & A - The Dangers of Smokeless Tobacco



Expert Q&A with Daniel G. Deschler, MD, chair of the AAO-HNS Head and Neck Surgery/Oncology Committee, director, Division of Head and Neck Surgery, Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, and director, Head and Neck Surgical Oncology, Massachusetts General Hospital.

Q. What exactly is “smokeless tobacco”?

A. Put simply, smokeless tobacco is either chewing tobacco or snuff. Both products are ground tobacco that is either chewed or sucked in the mouth, but not ingested. Because the tobacco isn't eaten or swallowed, the person must spit out the juice produced while using the products.

Q. If I'm not inhaling smoke or swallowing the tobacco, why is it so bad?

A. Smokeless tobacco contains many harmful chemicals that are absorbed into the body as you chew or suck it. Many of the chemicals are carcinogens, which means they are cancer-causing. So even if you aren't inhaling smoke, you are still exposing your mouth and throat to these harmful substances, which transfers the risk of cancer from your lungs to your head and neck. Smokeless tobacco is also quite irritating to the lining of the mouth, as the cancer-causing agents within it are directly absorbed into the cells lining the mouth, setting the stage for these cells to become cancerous.

In addition to the carcinogens, smokeless tobacco also contains high levels of nicotine, the same addictive chemical that is in cigarettes. In fact, certain brands of smokeless tobacco deliver up to four times the amount of nicotine as a cigarette. So you can easily become addicted to chew or snuff. People who use smokeless tobacco are also more likely to begin smoking. The bottom line is that any kind smokeless tobacco use is extremely harmful to your body.

Q. What kind of cancers can smokeless tobacco cause?

A. Oral cancers are the most common cancers resulting from prolonged use of smokeless tobacco products. They include cancers of the tongue, lips, cheeks, and gums. It can also increase your risk for developing cancer of the pharynx and esophagus, the upper portions of your throat. Such cancers can become quite aggressive and involve the upper and lower jaw bone, as well as travel to lymph nodes in the neck.

For patients with advanced cases of cancers in these areas, surgeons often have to remove all or part of the tongue, lips, cheeks, gums, or jaw. Complete treatment for these cancers may require the additional use of chemotherapy and radiation therapy, which can also lead to partial or total loss of taste, impaired speech, or the need to use a feeding tube. Fortunately, if caught early enough, there are very effective treatments for head and neck cancers.

Q. What are the common symptoms of these cancers?

A. Some early warning signs of oral cancers are:

- A sore that bleeds easily and does not heal
- A lump or thickening anywhere in the 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 the tongue or jaw

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, see your doctor immediately. He/she may recommend that you see an otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeon, physicians specially trained to treat conditions of the ears, nose, throat, head, and neck.

Q. How can I get help to quit using smokeless tobacco?

A. Addiction to smokeless tobacco products is just as serious as an addiction to cigarettes, but there is help available through your physician and support groups. A good first step would be to talk to your doctor and ask if he/she can help set up a quitting plan with you. He/she may also direct you to a national quit helpline, like the National Network of Tobacco Cessation Quitlines, run through the National Cancer Institute, at 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

You may also want to consider using The American Cancer Society Great American Smokeout^(R) as a firm date to quit. This year, the Great American Smokeout is on November 19, 2009. You can find more information about the event at www.cancer.org/greatamericans. Helpful tips for quitting can also be found on the Academy's website at <http://www.entnet.org/AboutUs/greatAmericanSmokeout.cfm>.