

THINK SMOKELESS TOBACCO IS SAFE? THINK AGAIN.

You see them everywhere – on the golf course, at the Little League game, sitting next to you at the rodeo or a Diamondbacks game. In America's Wild West, which includes Arizona, *they* are the hundreds of thousands of men, women and children who chew on tobacco or suck on snuff – a group of tobacco products known as “smokeless tobacco.” And even though many of these same people have stained teeth, bad breath and carry a little cup around so they won't spit tobacco juice on the ground, they might not see anything particularly wrong with their habit. Or they might not even think it's a habit at all. But are they in denial about the dangers? Is smokeless tobacco safer than smoking?

“Whether it's a cigarette or a plug of tobacco or a pouch of snuff, it's all the same,” said Dr. Michael Radcliffe, dentist to the Arizona Diamondbacks and a board member of the Delta Dental of Arizona Foundation. “All these products contain dangerous chemicals and also nicotine, which is highly addictive. Like any drug habit, many people who use nicotine products are in a state of denial about the health consequences. People sometimes tell me they feel like they're putting a gun to their head every time they stick tobacco into their mouth, but they say it's just so addictive they don't feel like they can quit.”

Smokeless tobacco use is often associated with professional baseball teams and other sports like rodeo riding and motorcross. Dr. Radcliffe, who donates his services to tobacco education and oral health screening clinics around the state, believes that one reason so many professional athletes and outdoor enthusiasts use smokeless tobacco is cultural peer pressure and the reinforcement they receive from others around them who are also users. But smokeless tobacco is just not confined to the sports world, says Dr. Radcliffe. “I've had people from all walks of life tell me that they started using chewing tobacco with their dads or grandpas when they were young, and the habit just stuck with them.”

In fact, an increasing number of students, housewives, businessmen and even young girls are picking up the habit. It's estimated that nearly 17% of Arizona adults are now smokeless tobacco users, which is above the national average, and 6% of middle and high school students are users. This translates into thousands of adults, teens and children at risk every day for oral cancer and a wide range of other health problems. Side effects from smokeless tobacco use can begin after just one week, and can range from minor cosmetic problems like stained teeth and bad breath to serious disorders like painful mouth sores, pre-cancerous lesions, oral cancer, high blood pressure and heart disease.

"It's interesting that you never hear anything about the long term health benefits of using tobacco," said Dr. Daniel Klemmedson, an oral surgeon and incoming president of the Arizona Dental Association. "People may get a short term high from the nicotine, or teenagers might use it to fit in or look cool, but I see patients in my office all the time that are scared they have mouth or throat cancer as a result of their tobacco use. There just doesn't seem to be an upside to it."

Smokeless tobacco comes in two different forms called snuff and chewing tobacco. Chewing tobacco usually consists of long strands of tobacco called "plugs," "wads" or "chew," and are placed between the cheek and gum. Snuff is powdered tobacco and is either sniffed or placed in a small bag between the lower lip or cheek and gum. Both types of tobacco are sucked and typically stay in the mouth over a long period of time. Says Dr. Klemmedson, "The amount of nicotine in smokeless tobacco will make you dizzy, and the absorption is substantial. It's almost like an IV of nicotine going into the body. I don't think most people who dip snuff or chew tobacco realize this." For those who use smokeless products throughout the day, this can equate to smoking 30-40 cigarettes.

Of particular concern to many health care professionals is smokeless tobacco's continuing popularity with young adult men, which is a prime audience for advertisers. Says Dr. Radcliffe, "Advertising makes it sound so glorious, so masculine. They show athletes and

other macho guys with all these pretty girls, living a rugged, exciting lifestyle. It makes it all seem so attractive. But people need to know what they're getting into when they use these products. Too often, I see the end results of tobacco use, and believe me, it's not a pretty sight."

Dr. Radcliffe says he is encouraged by the amount of education that is being directed at young people, though. "As a parent and coach of Little Leaguers, I'm seeing more awareness among kids that using any kind of tobacco is wrong. Even so, I still see cans of tobacco stuck in the back pockets of kids. We just need to keep getting the message out in the schools and through parents and coaches. That's the best defense to keep kids tobacco free."

So what can parents do to protect their kids from getting hooked? "Parents need to understand that chewing tobacco and snuff are not safe alternatives to smoking. Just like with smoking, parents need to have frank discussions with their kids about smokeless tobacco, and keep telling them that no form of tobacco use is safe," said Dr. Klemmedson. "Another important thing is for parents, coaches and other role models to set a good example. If a parent or coach uses tobacco, they can't very well tell kids not to."

Because dentists are often the first health care practitioners to diagnose oral health disease, the National Institute of Health recommends that dentists ask all of their patients, beginning at the age of 5, about their tobacco use. Organizations like the Delta Dental of Arizona Foundation are also taking on the issue to help educate the community at large about the adverse health effects of tobacco, and the need to have regular check ups. "Regular check ups are especially important for smokeless tobacco users because of the extended amount of time the tobacco stays in contact with the mouth," says Dr. Radcliffe. "You just hope you're getting through to people in a sympathetic way so you can help them get the information they need to stay healthy."

More information on smokeless tobacco and tobacco cessation programs can be found through the Delta Dental of Arizona Foundation at www.deltadentalaz.com, the National Spit

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Tobacco Education Program at www.nstep.org, the Arizona Tobacco Education Prevention Program at www.tepp.org, and Tobacco Free Kids at www.tobaccofreekids.org.