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FOR MORE INFORMATION
MDS, Michelle Sanford (800) 342-8747
Dana Farber, Robbin Ray

Smokeless Tobacco is a Losing Game

As America's favorite pastime approaches, young fans will soon be watching their favorite players hit home runs, steal bases, and argue over foul balls. Unfortunately, they will see also see "fouls" of another kind—players spitting out chewed-up tobacco and tobacco juice onto the field and in the dugout.

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute are partnering to spread the word that chewing tobacco, otherwise known as spit or smokeless tobacco, is not a safe alternative to smoking. In fact, according to the National Spit Tobacco Education Program (NSTEP), 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.

"Smokeless tobacco is absorbed quickly and directly through the inside of the mouth, making it very dangerous," states Dr. Michael Kahn, and MDS member and chair of Tufts University School of Dental Medicine's Department of Oral Pathology.

According to a 2005 survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 12,000 male high school students in Massachusetts reported using chewing tobacco on at least one of the 30 days preceding the survey.

Furthermore, many health care groups fear that due to the increasing number of smoking bans mandated, there is a strong possibility that this number will rise.

Meanwhile, industry analysts, tobacco control advocates, and health care providers are watching as a new smokeless tobacco product is being marketed to the public. This chewing tobacco “pouch” does not need to be chewed or spat. Instead, users swallow the tobacco juices produced as the pouch rests on the gum line. Anti-smokeless tobacco advocates fear that teenagers will be attracted to this new product because it is easier to conceal and not as offensive to others.

However, according to Dr. Kahn, what the public must understand is that there are potentially serious health risks associated with any type of tobacco, including these pouches. "Although the tobacco pouches, which were originally popular in Scandinavia, are less messy, that doesn't mean they are any less dangerous,” he says.

The most serious effect of using smokeless tobacco is an increased risk of cancer of the mouth and pharynx. Research has shown more than half of all smokeless tobacco users have non-cancerous or pre-cancerous lesions in their mouth, with the chance of getting oral cancer 400 percent greater than nonusers. In addition to the increased risk of cancer, smokeless tobacco also erodes teeth and gums.

So when teens see their favorite athletes or other individuals using smokeless tobacco, the MDS and Dana Farber recommend they keep in mind the story of Bill Tuttle, an outfielder who played for the Detroit Tigers and Minnesota Twins. He chewed tobacco throughout most of his baseball career and developed mouth cancer. As a result, doctors had to remove his jawbone, right cheek, many of his teeth, his gum line, and his taste buds. He eventually died of the disease in 1998.

For more information on oral cancer and smokeless tobacco, call the Massachusetts Dental Society at **(800) 342-8747** or visit **www.massdental.org**.