

Cancer in a Can

Baseball Habit Becomes a Growing Concern Among Younger Athletes

By Katie Snyder

The connection between baseball and tobacco chewing dates to the 19th century, when baseball players would keep a dip, or wad of smokeless chewing tobacco, in his mouth to keep it moist while on the field. Since then, chewing and spitting have been entwined with the sport. Decades ago, legends including Babe Ruth and Ted Williams lent their names and faces to tobacco ads. Today, the popular pastime continues to remain a big part of Major League Baseball culture and a major area of concern among health experts.

So what's the danger?

"Smokeless tobacco, chew, snuff, dip—call it what you want but don't call it harmless," said Dr. Farley Yang, radiation oncologist at Arizona Center for Cancer Care.

Just look at baseball history. Baseball legend Babe Ruth died of heavy tobacco use at 52 from a cancerous tumor caused by chewing tobacco. And, San Diego Padre Tony Gwynn recently underwent surgery to remove a cancerous tumor from his cheek, which was believed to stem from his addiction to chewing tobacco.

Despite the negative effects, the growing use of smokeless tobacco, chewing tobacco and snuff continues to be a cause of concern for health experts, who suggest athletes in Major League Baseball are not just putting their own health at risk but also influencing young people and young athletes to take up the cancer-causing habit.

A study done by the American Cancer Society found that 40 percent of all Major League Baseball players and 30 percent of all minor league players chew tobacco on a daily basis.

In addition, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that use of smokeless tobacco products has increased in the past 10 years amongst young adults and teens.

"Many mistakenly believe that smokeless tobacco is not as harmful as the tobacco found in cigarettes and this simply is not true," said Yang. "Research shows there are more than 28 cancer-causing chemicals in

smokeless tobacco products which can affect individuals of all ages with oral health problems."

According to Yang, individuals who use smokeless tobacco products are 60 percent more likely to develop mouth-related cancers such as esophageal cancer and various types of oral cancer, including cancers of the mouth, throat, cheek, gums, lips and tongue.

"So, basically it has all the same cancer-causing ingredients as cigarettes, only with a less scary-sounding name," Yang said.

Major League Baseball has taken steps to discourage chewing tobacco, by banning tobacco use in the minors and by providing expert health advice and education programs. The new restrictions are a positive step in preventing tobacco's impact on health: oral cancer, mouth lesions and gum disease, to name a few ailments caused by the product.

So, with baseball season underway, the smokeless tobacco trend is generating discussion once again and health experts are encouraging individuals to opt out of using the cancer-causing products.

If you use smokeless tobacco products or know someone that does, health experts suggests doing the following:

- Planning ahead and using substitutes such as sugarless gum, sunflower seeds or dried fruit.
- Get involved in healthier activities that will help you avoid using the products and will put you in overall better health.
- Talk to your doctor about alternative ways to help you kick the habit.
- And make sure to have regular cancer screening examinations. Early detection is critical for preventing oral cancers.

"Approximately 40,000 Americans will develop oral cancers this year and 80 percent to 90 percent of these oral cancer cases will be directly related to the use of some form of tobacco," Yang said. "But with a little education and by getting to know the facts is the best thing to do to prevent starting the nasty habit and preserving your health."

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