

## **Spit it Out**

by Chad Lethlean

Some people think that it is a cure for smoking. Women are using it for weight loss, and men think that it is macho. These beliefs are very common, especially amongst teens, yet none of them are true. It is not helpful for weight loss, nor can it make a person stronger. In fact, chewing tobacco is the number one source of deaths that could be prevented in the United States ("Tobacco"). Using chewing tobacco could lead a person down a path of addiction and its related problems. In an article in the Modesto Bee, an online newspaper, told about a man named Rick Bender who was just 12 years old when he got his first taste of chewing tobacco. He was 26 when he was diagnosed with oral cancer and had four surgeries over the next two years. As a result, he not only has limited use of his right arm, but he also lost half of his jaw and one-third of his tongue. "They call me the man without a face," Bender stated when he spoke to Modesto Junior College students in California. Bender has appeared on numerous national television talk shows, including the Today Show, and he has also done some work with the surgeon general (Rowland). Fortunately, Bender and others are willing to educate on the dangers of chewing tobacco. It is helpful for everyone, but particularly teens, to learn the reasons for chewing tobacco's popularity, to understand the health hazards of chewing tobacco, and to learn about a few products that can help with quitting.

Quitting is much more difficult than starting the habit. There are numerous reasons why today's youth decide to "take up" chew. One is the influence that professional athletes have on young people. Most youth want to be just like the pros. So, it doesn't help much when they see their role models on T.V. playing baseball, or any other sport, with a moist 'dip' in their bottom lip. When kids see this, they are "subliminally persuaded" to give chew a try. For example, on Aug. 6, 2000, an article was published in the Boston Globe about a 19-year-old young man named Quinton Case. He said that he saw baseball players and rodeo riders using chewing tobacco. This, in turn, influenced him to start chewing when he was just 13 years old (Haddigan). Like most kids, he probably thought that it would be cool to have a can of moist snuff in the back pocket of his jeans that would leave a visible "ring" on his pocket. This "ring" has become a status symbol, signifying that chewers are "real men" (or "real women") and ready for "adulthood." Another major reason for kids chewing is the fact that they are not educated on the harsh consequences that can come from using it. Surprisingly, only 40 percent of teens are aware that chewing tobacco is harmful, according to the Centers for Disease Control and a Surgeon General's report ("Covering"). Overall, chewing tobacco continues to be popular among teens.

But, this popularity creates many harms for those who are lured into using it. The most common health effect of chewing tobacco is a mouth condition called leukoplakia, a pre-cancerous condition. Leukoplakia consists of small white lesions that are typically located on the gums or inside the bottom lip where the chewer puts the dip. Interestingly enough, leukoplakia can develop during the first three years of chewing tobacco use, according to the U.S. Surgeon General (Hecht). Not only can it develop rather quickly, but it is also quite common among chewers. In a recent study reported in the New Orleans Times Picayune, 141 professional baseball players who used chewing tobacco were tested for a mouth condition, and 83 of them were diagnosed with leukoplakia (Hecht). The only cure for the mouth condition is a small surgical procedure to remove the damaged tissue. If not cured, leukoplakia results in oral cancer that may affect the cheeks, tongue, gums, throat, and even the stomach. Some symptoms of oral cancer may include lesions on the tongue or lip or a burning sensation where the cancer is located, indicating that a tumor is advancing. According to WebMD, for about 50% of the people diagnosed with oral cancer, the cancer is already so advanced that it has spread to the throat or neck. About 25% of those people will die because of late diagnosis and treatment ("Oral Cancer"). Health related effects aren't the only negative side effects to chewing tobacco. There are a few social "stigmas" that accompany chewing tobacco as well. According to the American Academy of Periontology, chewing tobacco causes gums to recede and also increases the chances of tooth loss ("Covering"). Another common effect of chewing tobacco is bad breath. Because the moist substance eats away at a person's

gums, it creates tiny holes that are a perfect home for bacteria to grow, which, in turn, creates very bad breath. Some other turn-offs from chewing tobacco include stained yellow teeth and the disgusting habit of spitting out the brown juice that chew creates. In brief, there are many negative side effects to chewing tobacco. Whether it be the health concerns or the social "stigmas," chewing is a very dangerous habit.

Once the habit of chewing tobacco is formed, it can be extremely hard to go "cold turkey." In Case's situation, he has been trying to quit for the past two years, but he just can't do it. He said it is as hard to quit using cocaine as it is to quit dipping (Haddigan). The reason for this is that chewing tobacco releases a significant amount of nicotine straight into the bloodstream. However, many different nicotine replacements can be used to help quit chewing. Nicotine gum is one alternative. However, the Tobacco Education Basics said that nicotine gum has not been very helpful in cessation efforts, but it is worth a try ("Smokeless"). Another, and more useful alternative, is the nicotine patch. The patch, as it is commonly called, is a small adhesive skin patch that contains a greater amount of nicotine than gum, and it is usually placed on the arm. This is for chewers who have gone through strong nicotine withdrawal and need more nicotine to calm them than in the gum. There is also a safer alternative to the nicotine replacements, and it is the tobacco free mint snuff. This mint snuff contains no tobacco and it tastes similar to the mint chewing tobacco the chewer previously used. There are some chewers that have such strong nicotine addictions that they find it helpful to mix the mint snuff with their chewing tobacco and gradually work away from the addiction of chewing tobacco. The mint snuff and other products can help chewers put an end to their "habit." Even though chewing tobacco is very addictive, there are alternatives to help a person get through the quitting process.

Overall, Bender and Case's lives demonstrate the addictiveness of chewing tobacco. Unfortunately, chewing tobacco continues to attract teens, and many of them suffer its health hazards. But, if they become addicted, there are products to help with the quitting process. However, the best way to quit is to never start.

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