

**All tobacco use dangerous to your health***Jerry Vandenberg*

I have heard many parents say that they would rather have their teenage children use smokeless tobacco (i.e. chew, dip, or snuff) than smoke tobacco, such as cigarettes.

While it is true that smoking tobacco is harmful — not only to the users, but also to the people around them — smokeless tobacco can be just as harmful and addictive. Besides secondhand smoke, which can present health hazards to people other than the smoker, smoking has other social stigmas such as the odor that emanates from the smoker's clothing and body or the mere fact that smoking is more noticeable, because we see the cigarette and smoke.

In general, the use of smokeless tobacco is less noticeable, aside from the user's spitting or perhaps the "spit cup" that the user may carry around. However, should parents be any less concerned about the use of smokeless tobacco as they are of smoking?

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, smokeless tobacco

can increase the risk for many types of cancer, including esophageal cancer, laryngeal cancer, stomach cancer, and cancers of the urinary tract such as the bladder or kidney. Additionally, the risk of cancer associated with tobacco carcinogens which enter through the bloodstream, such as colon cancer and cervical cancer, is also increased.

In fact, it is the carcinogens contained in tobacco that increase the risk of cancer. For smokers this means that it isn't necessarily the smoke itself which increases the risk of cancer, but the carcinogens that the smoke contains. On the other hand, the juice from smokeless tobacco is filled with those same cancer-causing carcinogens.

So what has caused many parents and others to conclude that smokeless tobacco is a better alternative to smoking tobacco?

Perhaps it is the cultural byproduct of rural life that has caused smokeless tobacco use to

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*Continued on Page 7*

Hays Daily  
News  
Hays, KS  
Circ. 12629  
From Page:  
6e  
6/10/2007  
31288





*Continued from Page 6*

be deemed acceptable. Although smoking has been stigmatized around the country, in rural areas the use of smokeless tobacco still carries an element of acceptance.

The modern athlete avoids tobacco use; however, some people may still envision the baseball player walking to the plate with a mouthful of tobacco and hitting the game-winning homerun. Or, perhaps more common to western Kansas culture is the picture of the cowboy cutting a chaw of tobacco.

Whatever the case may be, smokeless tobacco use has not fostered apprehension among western Kansas residents in the same way that smoking has.

The Youth Access Prevention Partnership (YAPP), along with the Regional Prevention Center at Smoky Hill Foundation for Chemical Dependency, Inc., and their partners initiated a program two years ago known as It's Everybody's Business in order to prevent youth access to tobacco products.

This program has been very successful in educating tobacco retailers and persuading them not to sell tobacco products to minors. However, a change of attitude in

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western Kansas regarding all tobacco usage is needed so that efforts to prevent tobacco use

among teens can truly be effective.

Therefore, community prevention efforts such as It's Everybody's Business must be coupled with family attitudes that condemn all forms of tobacco use. As parents we can promote prevention among our youth.

First, keep tobacco use outside, regardless of the weather or any other factors. Do not use any tobacco in the home, car, or any other enclosed environment that your children may use, and avoid using any kind of tobacco in the presence of your children.

Obviously, taking cigarette smoke outside will eliminate your child's exposure to cancer-causing secondhand smoke. However, taking all tobacco use outside reinforces the negative aspects and social stigma of tobacco use. It may also help parents move toward step two, quitting.

Quitting is difficult; however, many resources are available to help people overcome tobacco addiction. Information provided by the Regional Prevention Center and other local organizations can help a person overcome addiction to tobacco. The journey to a tobacco-free lifestyle is a long one, but every journey begins with a single step. 

Hays Daily  
News  
Hays, KS  
Circ. 12629  
From Page:  
7e  
6/10/2007  
31288

