

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Smokeless Tobacco: The Dirt on Dip
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health* TV. I'm Jeanne Blake. It's baseball season, and too often, baseball players are taking to the field with chewing tobacco firmly tucked against their jaws. It's called smokeless tobacco or "dip," and it may be smokeless but it's far from harmless, as you will see in this video, "The Dirt on Dip," produced by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

[VIDEO CLIP]

NARRATOR: What these guys are doing is chewing tobacco. It's a nasty habit. I should know, I used to be a heavy user. Unfortunately, a lot of young people start using dip either in chew or snuff form because they think it's a safe alternative to cigarettes. Well, it's not. But don't take my word for it. Listen to other young people who have had experience with the stuff.

JOHN: The first time I tried it was when I was like 12, 13.

COREY: I started when I was 14.

ROB: I was 14 years old.

RYAN: I started using it when I was 16 1/2.

CHRIS: Around the seventh or eighth grade I started to notice that my friends were getting interested in it, so I was like, you know, I was like everyone else: try it out.

COREY: I started because I saw an older figure who I knew very well, he was using it a lot. I guess he would go through a tin and a half a day.

RYAN: A good friend of mine who was about a year older was big into it, so every time I went over to his house he'd say, "Try some, try some." And sooner or later, you know, I tried it.

SAM: Well, my first dip was, a number of friends and I were going to a hockey game. We were just sitting around and a couple of them had been using dip regularly for about two years, and I just decided to have one because that's what they were doing.

ROB: I looked up to most of the seniors and I saw them using it, so I thought, you know, it's an acceptable thing to do, so I tried it.

COREY: Every kid wants to be older than they are. So when you see someone older using it, not to bring down the sport of baseball, but a lot of baseball players do use chewing tobacco or things of that substance.

ROB: Having a big chew in your mouth, spitting out tobacco, is what the professional athletes do, and by just looking at them makes you want to do it.

NARRATOR: Corey, Dan, Ryan, John, Rob, Chris, Bryan, and Sam – they have all used spit tobacco. They know firsthand how addicting it can be. According to the National Cancer Institute, an average dip held in the mouth for thirty minutes has the equivalent nicotine of four cigarettes, and a person who does two tins a week gets as much nicotine as someone smoking a pack and a half a day.

RYAN: So that's pretty much the "crack" of nicotine. You put it in your mouth, you get hooked, you know, you try to quit but you can't.

ROB: I started off maybe a tin every two or three weeks, which I felt was no big deal, but as I kept going, I realized that I was going through a tin a week, a tin every three days.

SAM: I started going through a tin a week almost, and it just got bigger. At my heaviest point, I was going through five tins a week.

DAN: Well, at first you're addicted to the habit. You know, passing the tin, having the dip and spitting, and hanging out, but then after a while, after it gets in your system enough, it is the nicotine that you're craving. You know, it's not even having the dip anymore. It's getting nicotine into your system.

COREY: The more and more you put in, the more and more you want.

ROB: So I kept going to the store, buying more tins, buying more tins, and I got hooked on it.

SAM: Probably the worse thing about it is the thing that you kind of lose control. I mean, after a while ... I tried to deny it for a while. You know, I'd quit for a week and think, I'm OK. I'd try a dip or two that week and I'd start again. When you really sit down and think about it, you realize that you're starting to lose control and you really have no control over being able to stop.

RYAN: Well, I tried to quit many times, and when driving home I used to do a lot, so I'd be like, "I can't do this anymore." So I'd throw it out the window, and then I'd get to my house and I'd go to sleep, and I'd wake up the next morning and I'd drive back to school and I'd find myself searching for it the next morning, you know, because I didn't have the money to buy it that day, so I'd find myself searching for it through weeds and whatever.

RYAN: You'd just always think about it. Usually about 45 minutes before I go to sleep, to put one in, or if I ignore it, I'd just lie in bed just thinking about it. I've called up my friends – a kid who lives down the street from me. I've called him up at 11:30 at night, quarter to 12, "Come meet me. I've got to get a dip from you." He's done the same thing to me.

CHRIS: It starts affecting your mind. It starts affecting your performance on the field. It's like, "Oh, I can't wait to get home and have a dip." It's bad.

NARRATOR: Most types of spit tobacco – chew, long leaf tobacco, and snuff – ground tobacco are full of stuff besides nicotine that can cause serious damage to your mouth and gums. The sugar in it causes tooth decay. The grit wears down your tooth enamel. The chemicals can cause gum disease. And it's full of nasty chemicals: Hydrazine, a toxic chemical. Cadmium – you find that in car batteries. Formaldehyde – that's embalming fluid. Polonium 210, a nuclear waste. Acetaldehyde, an irritant. Uranium 235, used for nuclear weapons.

NARRATOR: And then there are known carcinogens, cancer-causing agents like benzopyrine and nitrosamine.

RYAN: That really tears apart your mouth. What happens is it that you get these little white sores all around your mouth here and there – all over the place. They can show up anywhere.

SAM: Probably a month or so after the first six months, I'd feel kind of a numbness in my gums and I'd reach in and rip out some dead skin, and that would happen every month or so. Also, probably the most obvious thing was the receding gums.

ROB: I saw myself, down on both sides, you begin to see like a white bubble in your lip, which is a bad sign, and you get little cold sores on your tongue, even in your gum line. You know you have a problem.

JOHN: A lot of times in the morning when I wake up, I have like skin hanging off my lip – not off my lip, but inside my gum and stuff.

RYAN: Sometimes I'd wake up in the morning and my gums would be so sore, I couldn't even eat breakfast because it hurt too much just to chew and open my mouth like that.

SAM: Once in a while I'd spit in my cup and put the cup to my lips and there would be some blood in there. Sometimes you'd pull some dead skin out. It's really disgusting. Actually, it scares you.

RYAN: A lot of times I get scared when I take out a dip and skin comes out with it, or the next morning I can take the skin right out of my cheek with my tongue.

SAM: And also, there's always the constant worry about cancer.

RICK: How many of you here, be honest with me, have ever tried this stuff? Few hands go up. How many of you know somebody else who uses it all the time? Almost every hand in the room goes up.

NARRATOR: This is Rick Bender. He used to be a heavy user of spit tobacco. Today he travels around the country talking to young people, spreading the word about what could happen to them if they use dip.

RICK: Well, I can tell you for a fact that it's not harmless. I started when I was at the age of 12 or 13, somewhere in that ballpark. When I first started, I might go through a can in a couple of weeks before I'd finish a can. But then, you know, by the time I got into high school, it was a couple of cans a week. And before long, you're doing a can a day, like I was. Around February of 1988, I also noticed a little sore right on the side of my tongue, at the age of 26. Right then I went to a specialist. Sure enough, I was diagnosed with cancer and given two years to live ... undifferentiated squamous cell

carcinoma because of my use of this stuff right here. I ended up going through 12 1/2 hours of surgery nine days before my 27th birthday. I was only 26 years old. April 10. I ended up losing a third of the tongue, they cut through the jaw, they went down through the neck to dig after the cancer, as well as the lymph glands, and in the process of digging that cancer out of my neck, they destroyed nerves, and those nerves control muscles in my right arm. That's as high as I can raise it today. I think back and there were three big things that influenced me toward using tobacco: peer pressure, advertisements, and the game of baseball. They would come on TV, guys like Lew Erickson, Earl Campbell, and some other professional athletes, holding up cans of this stuff and saying, "Take a pinch and save a puff." You know, it's supposed to be a safe alternative to cigarettes. It turned out to be a lie. You buy a jug of Prestone from the auto store to change the antifreeze in your car, they tell you to put rubber gloves on, eye protection, do not ingest, you know, because it can kill you. Well, the instructions tell you to put one pouch in your mouth for about a minute. That's instructions on how to get addicted to nicotine. I've come across six survivors in the last four years, but I come across hundreds of families every year that come up and say to me, "I lost such-and-such," "I've lost somebody that was 23, 17, 8 1/2," I mean, all over the place. Out of the six other guys that underwent surgery, only one of them can talk. Now you're sitting here listening to me talk and you can understand what I'm saying. You really shouldn't be able to. It's amazing that I can still speak, because I can't even lift my lips. I ended up losing one half of my jaw, the muscles, the lymph glands, and nerves out of the right side of my neck and considerable amount of use of my right arm. I have a 10-year-old son who just loves the dickens out of the game of baseball. You know, I can't even go out in the backyard and play catch with my own little boy. My little brother had to come over to teach my son how to play baseball. That hurt. It still hurts today to think about what he lost, you know, not just me.

NARRATOR: As part of this presentation, we chose slides of the damage that it can do: gum disease, tooth loss, and oral cancers. And Rick always ends by telling the story of a young man named Sean.

RICK: This is a picture of Sean when he was a senior in high school. In the beginning of Sean's senior year he saw a sore on the side of his tongue. It turned out that Sean was diagnosed with cancer just like I had. In the beginning of his senior year he had to go through eight and a half hours of surgery to remove that cancer. But they must have missed a little bit of it, because before Sean could even start his radiation four weeks later, that cancer was back. A lump showed up on the other side of his neck. He had to go in for a second operation four weeks after his first. Three or four months went by, though. Sean woke up one morning and found a little lump right below his ear on the side of his neck. That cancer was back again. It took a little longer to come back, but it was back. This is what he looked like

by the time all of his buddies were taking their dates to the senior prom. Even after his third operation, Sean started to develop headaches. They went in and did a CAT scan, they found a tumor again. It was still there. But now it had worked its way in the back of his neck, going up to his brainstem and down the back of his spine. At that point, there was nothing they could do for Sean. He died. He never got to see his 19th birthday. You get so used to seeing those sores, a hundred come along and there's no problem. Then a hundred and one comes along that is the problem. It's a bullet and it smolders, and then, boom.

ROB: Rick Bender really has touched my life. When I was walking in, I had no intention of quitting. You know, this was just another assembly to have me quit smokeless tobacco. When he was talking as I came out, I realized I had to stop, you know, I didn't want to end up like him, and it could happen to me.

DAN: It's not worth it to dip. There's a lot on the line. There's nothing to gain from it.

ROB: My advice to kids who felt the same or feel the same way I did is that, you know, don't start, because if you start, it's not that easy just to quit the habit. It's gonna affect you inside and it's a lot harder than you think it's going to be.

SAM: Go up to every single person who dips and I guarantee they will tell you they regret they even started.

NARRATOR: Smokeless tobacco is also packaged in small, individual packets that resemble little tea bags that come in mint and fruit flavors. Often young people will start using the lower nicotine products and then gradually grade up to the harder stuff, stuff with more nicotine. Although tobacco producers claim they don't target young people, they do promote their products at sporting events, car racing, and rock concerts. They also run magazine ads offering free samples through the mail. Although it says you have to be 18 to receive starter packs, younger kids can get a hold of them.

RYAN: You've got to put the blame on the tobacco industry.

COREY: Yeah, they are targeting the kids, so it's just exploitation. That's all it is.

CHRIS: All tobacco companies started triggering kids very young because they know they're stupid when they're young and they don't know any better.

COREY: They know these kids are using it, because as far as they know, like if they see Joe Camel or something like that, and it looks cool doing it then I'll look cool doing it, so I'll do it. So they know their kids. Whatever they see, they probably want to try it.

RYAN: They send them things, these pre-sample starter trial things in the mail or in magazines so kids 10 through 16 could probably order them.

COREY: They taste like candy. I was talking to my friend, and he went home and saw his little brother actually ask him if he wanted a dip. And he goes, "Yeah, what?" And he goes, "These little bags." He said, "I can't wait for my brother to get started."

RYAN: You know, anyone can order it, anyone can get started at any time, and the reason they do that is because it just gets you hooked.

CHRIS: What I finally realized is that I can't do this, because there's no way I'm going to do this when I'm 30, 40 years old and still be alive.

NARRATOR: Here's some advice from those of us who have been able to break the habit: To get psyched up about quitting, talk about some of things you don't like about dip – the mess, the addiction, the girls don't like it, the cost, and the dangers. Other hints on how to stop: Set a quit date and then start gradually reducing the amount that you do. Ask your friends and family for support. Stock up on hard candy, gum, cloves, cinnamon sticks, toothpicks, sunflower seeds, or mint substitutes. When the craving hits, do deep breathing. Try meditating. Drink water or exercise. If you have really strong cravings, you may want to see a doctor about nicotine gum. Quitting's not easy, but it's worth it.

COREY: My thing was to gradually stop. I went from six, you know, to doing it three times a day, and then from three I went down to one. Then once I was down to one, I went to one every other day, and then to every few days and so on, so gradually I got accustomed to using smaller amounts, to I thought it was time for me to stop and then I stopped.

RYAN: It's funny, because it does rule your life and when you stop, you kind of like, search for something, you know, something to do, and I chew gum, as you see me now.

COREY: You stay clean for about a month or so but, then you might smell it or be along with your friends who are using it and you might want one. But there are times like that when you just have to think that I'm doing right thing and I've come so far. I just have to keep on doing what I'm doing and that's stay clean.

DAN: It goes along with self-pride. I can sit in a room now, I get a craving, but I can sit with three or four guys who have a dip and not have one. I mean, it's offered to me, whatever, but I have self-pride and I know that I'm not going to do it anymore. You know, kick the habit, and I've kicked it. What I've realized is, it's a habit. Nicotine is a very addictive drug.

COREY: I just feel like the stuff is if off my back. I don't have to worry about two or three years down the line developing some type of ailment that can take a certain part of my body away, or perhaps my life. I just don't have to worry about that anymore. I can go on and do whatever I want to do.

RICK: If you're doing this stuff, quit now. If you're not, don't start, because you're not just playing a game. Sooner or later you're gonna end up paying the price, and the price is way too high to take for what you get out of this little can.

[END VIDEO]

JEANNE BLAKE: People who use smokeless tobacco are 50 times more likely to develop cancers of the throat or the mouth. If you use chewing tobacco or dip, doctors urge you to check your mouth often in the places where you hold the tobacco. See a doctor or dentist right away if you have a sore that bleeds easily and doesn't heal, a lump or thickening anywhere in your mouth or neck, soreness or swelling that doesn't go away, trouble chewing, swallowing, or moving your tongue or jaw. Thanks for joining us. I'm Jeanne Blake.

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