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Snus: No smoke, no spit, but many worry about kids

Tobacco - Health officials say the pouches of chew, which are getting a trial-market run in Portland, will lure the young

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Big Tobacco's newest offering is as small as a dime.

You don't smoke it or spit it. It's so discreet you can use it unnoticed by bouncers. Or teachers. Or flight stewards.

And you can buy it only in shops or bars here in Portland or in Austin, Texas.

Called snus (rhymes with goose), the tiny tobacco-filled pouches have been popular in Sweden for decades, though most of Europe bans them as cancer-causing. Hoping snus will take hold in America, R.J. Reynolds has been test marketing Camel Snus since summer in two of the nation's young, hip cities. Local health officials are less than thrilled.

"Portland has been selected as a guinea-pig market for an untested drug," said Cathryn Cushing, a specialist with the state's Tobacco Prevention and Education Program.

The snus experiment is part of a tobacco industry move to sell more smoke-free products, in response to anti-smoking laws sweeping many states. Besides snus, R.J. Reynolds recently paid \$3.5 billion for Conwood, which makes Grizzly and other chewing tobaccos. Competitor Philip Morris is testing Taboka, its own "smoke-free and spit-free tobacco pouch."

But why debut a chew in Portland? R.J. Reynolds spokesman David Howard said the city is "maybe a little below average" in chewing tobacco use. And while Portland and Austin have reputations as hipster havens, Howard said Reynolds isn't targeting twentysomethings. The company picked Portland and Austin to get feedback from "all adult tobacco consumers."

Health workers have a theory about Portland's selection: Big Tobacco wants a new generation of customers.

"I see it as a young adult marketing strategy, and we have a lot of hip young adults in this city," Cushing said. And "if it appeals to a 22-year-old, I think you can assume it will appeal to a 16-year-old. Because what do 16-year-olds want to be? Twenty-two."

The Tobacco-Free Coalition of Oregon's Tabithia Engle was blunter.

"Nicotine is an extremely addictive drug," she said. "The tobacco industry is in Oregon trying to hook our kids."

Snus is different from most chewing tobacco. It's engineered to be easy to use, fueling charges it lures new nicotine addicts.

No need to spit

Snus tobacco is steam-pasteurized, not fermented like most U.S. chewing tobacco, so users do not have to spit out the juices. The small, tidy pouches, sold in tins of 20, come in three flavors: regular, spice and frost, which some users say smells like mint tea and tastes like gum, adding to any youth appeal.

Howard firmly denied that R.J. Reynolds has any interest in selling snus to kids.

"Children should not smoke. They should not use these products," Howard said. "These things reflect our desire to offer a variety of different tobacco products to adult tobacco consumers."

That desire is stoked by laws that ban smokers from lighting up at work and in many public places. The Snuscamel.com Web site suggests using snus "at a concert, right in front of security. On a jet from Miami to L.A. At a bar, at a club, even an overpriced tapas restaurant."

Howard declined to say how many adult tobacco consumers have tried Camel Snus, or how long the sales test will run. "The test market will go on until we feel that we have gotten enough learning."

Judging from interviews with a dozen sellers, snus has not set Portland's tobacco world afire. Most local bartenders and store owners said they sell one or two tins a month, mostly to men in their 20s and 30s. The minty frost flavor sells best.

Only Rose City Tobacco & Pipes owner Janna Collingwood said snus "does really well" at her shop. Most buyers are tobacco chewers, she said, but smokers who can't light up in public any more also are trying it. In fact, she said, "we get calls from all over the country asking for it. I have customers from as far away as Kansas who ask me to send it to them."

One local snus fan is Portland bartender Jesse Thompson. He doesn't like other chewing tobacco because you have to spit all the time, and "it's messy and it gets all over and stains your teeth." Instead, Thompson smoked about a pack a day. But when he went to buy Camel cigarettes one day, he saw snus -- and has been using it since.

"I'm using four to five pouches a day and smoking a couple cigarettes," Thompson said. "I'm definitely using it as a tool to quit smoking. . . . I plan to quit altogether, all tobacco products. That's my goal."

Health risks

People such as Thompson pose a public health quandary, said Herb Severson, an expert with Oregon Research Institute in Eugene who studies how to quit smokeless tobacco. Chewing tobaccos, including snus, cause mouth and throat cancer and heart disease. But they are clearly safer than cigarettes, which pose higher heart disease risk and can cause lung cancer. "Smoking is far and away the most harmful," Severson said.

The question is: Will cigarette addicts smoke less if they start using snus? Public health folks call that tactic of adopting less-bad habits "harm reduction," like giving drug addicts clean needles. Some doctors say Sweden's low rate of lung cancer is due to heavy snus use.

"It's a big debate in the public health community," Severson said. "Can you get people to reduce the harm they're doing to themselves without stopping?"

Severson worries that smokers faced with public smoking bans will use snus "as a situational substitute" to get through work or a flight, making them less likely to quit tobacco altogether. "What we don't know is whether widespread use of these products will help people quit," he said. "We also don't know whether these products might increase smoking."

In kids, at least, chewing tobacco is linked to smoking. Severson studied Oregon seventh- and ninth-graders who chew tobacco. Two years later, chewers were three times more likely to smoke than their peers. "We would say it's a gateway drug," Severson said.

Oregon tobacco foes contend that is the hidden goal of snus, with its slick ads and discreet, flavored pouches.

"It doesn't look like tobacco. It doesn't smell like tobacco. You can use it and nobody will know," Cushing said. "It's an incredibly devious way to get the youth market, and it can get kids addicted without their teachers or parents knowing."

Howard said Reynolds is not marketing snus to kids and does not want kids using snus: "Not only is it illegal to sell to minors, they lack the maturity to assess the risks associated with these products."

Cushing has another worry: What's in snus? Federal laws require ingredient lists on most things people put in their mouths, even nicotine gums to help smokers quit. But tobacco products are exempt. Snus cans don't list ingredients. Howard would say only that Camel Snus contain U.S. and Turkish tobaccos, with about as much nicotine as a cigarette, and "some additives" for freshness.

"Why are people putting this in their mouths?" Cushing said. "We don't know what's in it. We don't know how much nicotine is in it. They don't have to tell us what's in it."

Engle has sent snus samples to testing labs to figure out what the pouches hold. Although she doesn't have results, she has suspicions: "We know in cigarettes, there's arsenic in it. There's 50 carcinogenic compounds. And it's difficult for me to make the leap and say this cigarette company that's making a product with 50 carcinogens in it, that they'll make a perfectly healthy product."

Howard says Reynolds is "making no health claims related to Camel Snus," noting that the packages bear health warnings -- one point where Big Tobacco and health workers agree.

"The public health claim on this product is the same one that the tobacco company is putting on the packaging: This is not a safe alternative" to smoking, Cushing said.

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