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WVU: Tobacco product high in nicotine

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Nov 18, 2008 (The Charleston Gazette - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- [RAI](#) | [Quote](#) | [Chart](#) | [News](#) | [PowerRating](#) -- CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A refrigerated smokeless tobacco product available in West Virginia convenience stores has twice the nicotine content of an earlier version of the same product sold elsewhere in the United States, according to a new study from West Virginia University researchers.

WVU researchers also say that Camel Snus -- a type of moist, ground tobacco that comes in teabag-like pouches -- has more nicotine than most other traditional smokeless tobacco products.

State public health officials believe tobacco companies such as R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., which makes Camel Snus, may be targeting West Virginia because the state has some of the nation's highest rates of smoking and spit tobacco use.

"With nicotine levels this high, these products are going to be highly addictive," said Bruce Adkins, director of the state Bureau for Tobacco Prevention. "There's no tobacco product that can be used without significant potential health risks."

R.J. Reynolds spokesman David Howard said the company has independent studies that show the opposite of what the WVU researchers found.

The nicotine content of Camel Snus (rhymes with "juice") has decreased over the past two years, he said.

Camel Snus also has less nicotine than the average nicotine content of more than 40 other smokeless tobacco products tested by an independent lab, Howard said.

"Camel Snus is actually well below the average nicotine content for smokeless tobacco products on the market," he said.

The WVU study showed that tests of another brand of snus -- Tourney Snus, which is manufactured in Sweden by the Liggett Group -- had much lower levels of nicotine than Camel Snus.

But Howard said tests conducted for R.J. Reynolds found that Tourney had nearly twice the nicotine content as Camel Snus.

WVU researchers purchased Camel Snus at a Morgantown convenience store and sent it to a lab for testing. The researchers stand by the study's results and accuse R.J. Reynolds and other tobacco companies of manipulating nicotine levels without informing consumers.

"Our research shows that nicotine levels in Camel Snus are stronger than in several snuff products sold in the U.S.," said Robert Anderson, deputy director of WVU's Prevention Resource Center and co-author of the study, which is expected to be published in an upcoming issue of the West Virginia Medical Journal. "Nothing is told to the consumer.

The public has a right to know what's in this."

State public health officials have been warning consumers about snus since September 2007, when it started showing up in some convenience stores.

Snus comes in a pouch that's placed between the gum and upper lip. Because of low salt and moisture content, snus users don't have to spit.

Stores keep the product in refrigerated display cases. Snus flavors include spice and mint.

Tobacco companies predict the product will succeed because it's convenient and discrete. Snus provides an alternative to cigarette smoking, which has been banned in many indoor places.

WVU researchers and public health officials worry that teens will become addicted to nicotine after using snus, making them more likely to start smoking or chewing regular smokeless tobacco.

Among high school students, West Virginia leads the nation in spit tobacco use with nearly 15 percent of youths saying they chew, according to the Youth Risk Factor Surveillance System.

"We think the target market for snus includes youth -- the same way the tobacco companies have marketed to young people for decades," Anderson said. "Kids could use it in schools, and teachers wouldn't even know."

Howard said Camel Snus is marketed only to adult tobacco consumers.

"That is the only market we wish to communicate with," he said. "Minors should never use tobacco products."

WVU researcher Cindy Tworek, who collaborated with Anderson on the snus study and testing, is working on a separate study of snus' popularity among West Virginia college students. Tworek has surveyed hundreds of young adults who live on or near college campuses across the state. She hopes to report her findings early next year.

"Packaging, colors and advertising have potential appeal to a younger audience, including pamphlets on where you can use Camel Snus," Tworek said. "The spitless nature of the product would also seem more attractive to women."

Some studies have suggested that snus can help people quit smoking, and that it's safer than lighting up. Anderson and Tworek said more research is needed.

"Snus products have not been tested in terms of long-term safety to know whether it's accurate to market them as a health-safe alternative to smoking," Tworek said.

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