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New snuff marketing makes W.Va. spittin' mad

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 By David Templeton, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Screenshot of Camel Snus Web site.

In West Virginia, which has the nation's highest rate of tobacco use, officials are spitting mad about R.J. Reynolds test-marketing a new smokeless product in two college towns.

The Winston-Salem, N.C., tobacco company is testing Camel Snus in Morgantown and Charleston with plans to market it nationwide early next year as a product that can be used where smoking is prohibited.

The product is designed to be placed between the upper lip and gum.

"We feel the primary market for snus is college kids," said Robert Anderson, director of the Prevention Research Center in West Virginia University's Department of Community Medicine.

"They want smokers to use snus when they can't smoke. This might be good for business, but not for public health."

So today, during the American Cancer Society's Great American Smokeout, West Virginia has targeted the new smokeless tobacco products, which health officials say are designed to lure a new generation -- college-age adults and women, in particular -- into addictive tobacco habits.

Smokeless and spitless products besides snus include Camel Sticks, Camel Orbs and Camel Strips -- new products that can be dissolved, chewed and swallowed.

Snus, which rhymes with "loose," is a Swedish snuff packed in a pouch that's refrigerated in tins in stores. The pouch is placed between the upper lip and gum so the nicotine can be absorbed without producing much saliva.

"Here in West Virginia, 4,000 people die every year from tobacco-related illness," said Bruce Adkins, director of the Division of Tobacco Prevention in the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health. "So, to break even, the tobacco companies have to have 4,000 replacement users each year."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said 19.8 percent of adults in the nation smoke -- the lowest percentage in 80 years. But 27 percent of West Virginians still smoke. The state also has the nation's highest percentage of users of spit tobacco, including chewing tobacco and snuff.

Yearly, about 443,000 deaths nationwide are attributed to tobacco use, the CDC states.

During today's Great American Smokeout, one-third of the nation's 46 million smokers are expected to refrain from smoking. The question is, how many will turn to other products in the meantime?

Camel Snus has 5 milligrams of nicotine per gram of tobacco, based on analysis performed for WVU. That's double the nicotine content of snus products R.J. Reynolds test-marketed in years past, Mr. Adkins said.

"The industry has added nicotine," he said, noting that companies aren't required to reveal the contents of tobacco products.

"That's why we're so concerned. We know there are carcinogens in this product and it's addicting."

Officials say smokeless products can cause oral, esophageal and gastric cancers. A study in Sweden also said smokeless tobacco doubles the risk of pancreatic cancer.

David Howard, R.J. Reynolds spokesman, said claims that the company spiked the products with high levels of nicotine "couldn't be further from the truth."

Snus, he said, has a nicotine level lower than most other smokeless products. He also said the company has been test-marketing the product coast-to-coast with plans to go nationwide with the product early next year.

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