

In The ZONE: It's Time to Stop

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Smokeless tobacco is bad for you.

Dip, chew, spit, snuff... regardless what you call it... it is bad for you.

The World Health Organization (WHO), Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), and National Cancer Institute (NIH) are all very clear on the dangers of smokeless tobacco. Using smokeless tobacco causes oral cancer, esophageal cancer and pancreatic cancer, and may also cause heart disease, gum disease, pre-cancerous oral lesions, tooth decay, and tooth loss.

Users of smokeless tobacco and users of cigarettes have comparable levels of nicotine in the blood. In users of smokeless tobacco, nicotine is absorbed through the mouth tissues directly into the blood, where it goes to the brain. Even after the tobacco is removed from the mouth, nicotine continues to be absorbed into the bloodstream, and the nicotine stays in the blood longer for users of smokeless tobacco than for smokers. And, as with cigarettes, its addictive properties promote long-term use and great difficulty in cessation of the habit.

In addition to the established health risks, smokeless tobacco does not improve concentration and overall sports performance. To the contrary, it can result in reduced reaction time, earlier fatigue, elevated blood pressure, elevated heart rate, dizziness, and dehydration. Athletes seeking performance enhancement are much better served by ensuring optimal sleep patterns, proper hydration, balanced nutrition, mental preparation and consistent training.

If you feel the “cool” factor of using smokeless tobacco outweighs these significant health and performance issues, consider this... smokeless tobacco use is quite possibly the least attractive habit. Ever. If the guaranteed bad breath and stained teeth aren't enough, the constant spitting and eventual mouth sores and bleeding gums should seal the deal.

In 2014 retired Major League Baseball (MLB) pitcher and broadcaster Curt Schilling was diagnosed with oral squamous cell carcinoma (ie. mouth cancer)...

In Schilling's case, after the 2001 championship with the Arizona Diamondbacks, after his bloody sock elevated him to hallowed status in Red Sox lore in 2004, after he padded his Boston resumé with another ring in 2007, his pattern didn't waver. Shut 'em down, head for the dugout and reap his reward: a dip of smokeless tobacco. "I never ever threw a pitch with a dip in my mouth," Schilling said. "I knew it wasn't good for you. I didn't want to be dehydrated. But if you go back and look, after every single game I pitched, the first thing I did when I got to the dugout was put one in. I didn't wait. I couldn't wait."... In February 2014, Schilling was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma, a direct result, he said, of his 30-year dipping habit. The cancer originated in his tonsil and spread to a lymph node in his neck. What followed was a 5-month ordeal in which brutal radiation and chemotherapy treatments left Schilling sobbing like a child, demoralized by the excruciating pain. He lost more than 70 pounds, developed a staph infection that could have killed him, endured two bouts of pneumonia, a bacterial infection in his intestines and multiple excruciating flare-ups of oral thrush, and wrestled with depression that required hospitalization and therapy. His scars are internal, imperceptible to the human eye, but his mouth is ravaged by 30 years of chewing tobacco. Even before his cancer was detected, Schilling had decimated his taste buds by dipping. The radiation and chemotherapy have since destroyed his salivary glands. Schilling doesn't eat in public because he can't be certain that his windpipe will close properly. Sometimes food seeps into his lungs and leaves him prone to infection. Other times he chokes, coughs his meal back up, then starts over again. Dining requires careful, methodical chewing, reducing his food to a pasty substance, much like baby food...

Yet Curt Schilling wants to make one thing perfectly clear: He doesn't want your sympathy because, he said, he doesn't deserve it. "I brought this on myself,"... Dipping, he acknowledges, remains a big problem in baseball. It seemingly played a role in claiming the life of Hall of Famer Tony Gwynn, who said his salivary gland cancer was the result of smokeless tobacco... While steps have been taken to limit the use of dipping - players are no longer allowed to carry cans in their uniform pockets, and its use is banned in the minors - Major League Baseball is still a ways from eradicating the insidious habit from the game. – Jackie MacMullan, ESPN (Oct 2014)

Despite all the readily available evidence, significant health risks, detrimental side effects, and numerous cases of former players suffering the dire consequences of its use, there continues to be a persistent presence of smokeless tobacco products in baseball culture.

Where do the baseball governing bodies stand on the issue? Baseball Canada has had a smokeless tobacco ban in place for more than 10 years. As stated in its Canadian Content Rules package:

6.04 (4.06.1) That the use of all tobacco products, including smokeless tobacco, by all on-field participants (players, coaches, managers, umpires etc.) be prohibited at all competitions sanctioned by Baseball Canada, PENALTY: Automatic ejection from the game.

Minor League Baseball (MiLB) has banned the use of smokeless tobacco since 1993. Although MLB unsuccessfully tried to add a smokeless tobacco ban to the previous collective bargaining agreement (CBA), the recently inked CBA between the players association and league *does* include a ban on smokeless tobacco use by any new MLB players. That's a start.

But it is not simply about legislating smokeless tobacco out of the game. Hopefully players, coaches and parents all *choose* not to chew. Just as young players look to their favorite MLB stars to emulate their baseball skill and performance, they like to *look like them*... the jersey, the hat, the cleats, the compression sleeve, the shades, the eye black, etc... whether they like it or not, MLB players *are* role models for the next generation of baseball players. For their own health, and for the future health of young players, it's time to stop.

*NOTE: I encourage you to read the following article related to smokeless tobacco use from **The Players' Tribune**... "**Letter to My Younger Self**"*
<http://www.theplayerstribune.com/curt-schilling-letter-to-my-younger-self/>