

Health

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Obama's New Addiction?

Senator Barack Obama is using nicotine gum to help him quit smoking. Now the question is, can he quit the gum?



Senator Barack Obama (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

Mr. Obama has said he started using the nicotine gum Nicorette about **nine months** ago. That's six months longer than the three months recommended on the gum package label. And Mr. Obama is not the only quitter who is still seeking a nicotine fix months after giving up cigarettes. A small percentage of the people who use nicotine replacement products like gums or lozenges end up hooked on a new habit, say doctors who specialize in smoking cessation. A colleague tells me her husband still chews the gum although he quit smoking several years ago.

Smoking cessation experts say they hope Mr. Obama's use of nicotine gum will encourage smokers to try a nicotine replacement product to help them quit. Although nicotine therapy doubles a smoker's chance of successfully kicking the habit, use of the products remains relatively low. "The problem is not that people use it too much," noted Lynn T. Kozlowski, interim dean of the school of public health and health professions at the University at Buffalo. "The greater problem is that they use it too little. People use it for a week, and then they are back smoking cigarettes."

People often don't stick with nicotine gums and lozenges because they dislike the taste. Another concern is that many people think nicotine is what makes cigarettes harmful. But nicotine is what makes cigarettes *addictive*. The harm comes from the combustion and release of 40 known carcinogens and other toxic chemicals into your body every time you take a puff.

Last month, a study in the medical journal *Addictive Behaviors* noted that part of the problem is that nicotine gums and lozenges have stricter labeling requirements than cigarettes themselves. Cigarette packages usually contain one simple boxed warning about the health risks of cigarettes. But package labels on smoking cessation products come with **detailed warnings** about use and side effects. The language leaves the impression that products to stop smoking are as risky or riskier than cigarettes themselves, said lead author Dr. Kozlowski. The study was aimed at developing a **consensus statement** for consumers about the safety and benefits of nicotine replacement products.

Doctors say their goal is to get more people to try nicotine replacement products as an aid to help them kick the smoking habit. Most people won't get hooked on the nicotine products, but a few people will. Susan Zafarlotfi, clinical director of the Breath and Lung Institute at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey, said one of her patients quit smoking a year and a half ago but still uses nicotine gum. "Especially when he smells someone else's smoke, he goes for the gum," she said.

Long-term use of nicotine gum is discouraged in part because it can be expensive and the gum can potentially stick to and damage dental work. Pregnant and nursing women and people taking certain medications may also be advised against using nicotine products. Some people get side effects from nicotine products, including headaches, hiccups, sore jaw and hives.

Dr. Zafarlotfi says that once someone has stopped smoking, she tries to encourage patients hooked on nicotine gum to start substituting real gum from time to time. "You may get a placebo effect," she noted.

Dr. Scott Sherman, associate professor at the New York University School of Medicine, says he encourages people to wean themselves off nicotine gum once they've quit smoking. "But if I had a choice between them being on Nicorette gum or going back to smoking, there's absolutely no question the gum is better," he said.

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