

INTERNET INFORMATION ABOUT HEALTH RISKS FROM SMOKELESS TOBACCO, CONTENT AND SOURCES

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There is widespread misunderstanding that health risk from smokeless tobacco (ST) is similar to that from cigarettes, while the evidence shows it is several orders of magnitude smaller. This undermines harm reduction messages and tells ST users they might as well switch to smoking. The internet is increasingly people's source for health information. We conducted a systematic review of popular internet information and found that it actively perpetuated the popular misperception.

A May 2003 Google search for "tobacco," "smokeless" and several synonyms, and "cancer" yielded 357 different websites (unique domains) after excluding academic papers and commercial sales sites. We searched each domain to identify claims about the risks of life-threatening disease and any sources of information cited.

Almost all the websites unequivocally advocated avoiding ST. Roughly half offered only general assertions that there are substantial health risks from ST. Roughly half provided detailed claims including relative risks, attributable risks, and comparisons to smoking cigarettes. Claims focused on oral cancer risk, usually claiming greater relative risk than is supported by the scientific literature, and virtually never providing the context of absolute risk.

Most websites offered no references for their health claims; those that did cited 9 sources almost exclusively. Only a handful of relatively unpopular websites made any reference to studies or experts that provided a balanced perspective on the relevant science. Only 6 made clear that ST is substantially less harmful than cigarettes, compared to more than 100 that explicitly stated or clearly implied that the absolute risks are similar.

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