ORAL NICOTINE POUCHES (ONP): A FACT SHEET FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

WHAT ARE ONP?

ONP are small, dissolvable pouches containing nicotine, flavorings, and sweeteners inside of a small envelope made of cellulose.[1] Unlike traditional oral smokeless tobacco products (e.g., chewing tobacco, snus), ONP do not contain tobacco leaves. Instead, they contain crystalized nicotine powder, delivering nicotine to the user through the oral mucosa when placed between the lip and gum. These products are commonly marketed as a "tobacco-free" nicotine product since they do not contain tobacco leaves. However, **they still deliver nicotine, the primary addictive substance in tobacco.** This distinction is crucial for counseling Veterans, since "tobacco-free" can be misinterpreted as harmless and is often a way to increase the appeal of these products.

BACKGROUND AND REGULATORY ISSUES

ONP entered the US market in 2016 and have seen a rapid increase in popularity. Estimates suggest that 3% of people who currently or formerly smoked cigarettes, especially young men, currently use these products. Their widespread availability in various retail settings, including gas stations, tobacco shops, convenience stores, and online platforms, contributes to their accessibility.

ONP are commonly marketed as a convenient and "smoke-free" alternative to cigarettes, implying that they are reduced harm products. However, this claim lacks scientific evidence. While some ONP products are authorized to be marketed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), ONP products are not approved as smoking cessation aids.

Nicotine pouches are available in a wide range of nicotine strengths, from relatively low doses (1-2mg per pouch) to significantly higher doses (10 mg or more per pouch). They also include various flavors (e.g., citrus, mint, fruit, and coffee). Many cities and states have implemented bans on the sale of all flavored tobacco products, including ONP.

THE HEALTH RISKS

While ONP do not involve burning tobacco like cigarettes, thus eliminating exposure to the numerous harmful chemicals present in cigarette smoke, they still deliver nicotine, a highly addictive substance with its own set of health risks.[3]

These health risks include:

- **Nicotine Addiction and Dependence:** High doses of ONP (6 mg or more nicotine per pouch) can deliver nicotine comparable to or higher than those delivered by tobacco cigarettes or oral smokeless tobacco products. This can lead to the rapid development of nicotine addiction and subsequent withdrawal symptoms upon cessation, such as irritability, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and intense cravings.
- **Cardiovascular Risks:** Nicotine is a known vasoconstrictor, meaning it narrows blood vessels, leading to increased heart rate and blood pressure. This can significantly increase the risk for cardiovascular events, such as heart attack, stroke, and peripheral arterial disease, especially in individuals with pre-existing cardiovascular conditions.
- **Other Risks:** Some users report hiccups, nausea, gum irritation, and gingivitis. Accidental ingestion of nicotine pouches, especially by children and pets, can lead to nicotine poisoning, including nausea, vomiting, dizziness, headache, seizures, and respiratory distress. It is crucial to emphasize safe storage and handling of these products.

- **Unknown Long-Term Health Effects:** As a relatively new product category, the long-term health consequences of ONP use remain largely unknown. Further research is essential to fully understand the potential risks associated with chronic use, including the impact on brain development in children and adolescents, reproductive health, and cancer risk.
- ONP should not be used by children, teenagers, and pregnant women.[1,3]

STOPPING TOBACCO USE

There is not enough evidence to support whether ONP help people to stop smoking. VA recommends using these treatments to help stop tobacco use:

- **Medications**
  - **Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT):** Nicotine patches, gum, and lozenges can help manage withdrawal symptoms. NRT differs from nicotine pouches because they are highly regulated and more slowly deliver a safe, standard amount of nicotine that minimizes the risk of addiction. They are designed such that the nicotine dosage is decreased over time. NRT has been proven to be safe by the FDA.
  - Medications like **bupropion** (under the trade name of Zyban) or **varenicline** (under the trade name of Chantix) can reduce nicotine cravings and withdrawals to make stopping easier. These medications are also FDA-approved.
- **Behavioral Therapy:** Counseling can provide strategies for coping with cravings and avoiding triggers.

The most effective and safest way to stop smoking is to combine FDA-approved medications with behavioral counseling. This approach will give Veterans the best chance of success to stop smoking. Veterans should be encouraged to work with their providers to use both medications and behavioral counseling for stopping smoking or other tobacco use.

VA provides many resources to help Veterans to stop smoking or other tobacco use. Here are some helpful VA resources:

- VA Tobacco and Health Webpage: www.mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/
- 1-855-QUIT-VET, VA's Free Telephone Quitline: www.mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/quit-vet.asp
- SmokefreeVET Text Message Service: www.smokefree.gov/VET
- Stay Quit Coach Mobile Application: mobile.va.gov/app/stay-quit-coach

THE BOTTOM LINE

Encourage Veterans to stop smoking or other tobacco use using effective tobacco use treatments available in VA, including FDA-approved medications and counseling.

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[1] CDC. Nicotine Pouches. 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/nicotine-pouches/index.html

[2] FDA. Other Tobacco Products FDA. 2024. https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/products-ingredients-components/other-tobacco-products

[3] FDA. Nicotine is Why Tobacco Products are Addictive. 2024. https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/health-effects-tobacco-use/nicotine-why-tobacco-products-are-addictive