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*****Survey of Texas school children shows most are unaware of dangers in smokeless tobacco use.

DALLAS--Children think smokeless tobacco is generally safe, according to a survey of 5,392 Texas school-age children.

"The fact is there is no doubt that the use of smokeless tobacco, that is, chewing tobacco and snuff, causes cancer," says Dr. Steven Schaefer, researcher/physician and associate professor of Otolaryngology at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas. "There have been plenty of experiments showing that when tobacco products are applied to the skin of laboratory animals, they cause cancer."

In the survey sponsored by the Texas Division of the American Cancer Society, only 40 percent of the children polled perceived the use of smokeless tobacco as "very harmful." Comparatively, 77 percent perceived cigarette smoking as "very harmful."

Of the children surveyed, 486 (nine percent) used smokeless tobacco, with 55 percent starting before age 13. Fifteen percent, or 810 students, said they regularly smoked cigarettes, with only 36 percent beginning to smoke before age 13.

These and other findings of the ACS 1983 study were recently reported at a joint conference of head and neck surgeons by Schaefer. Other investigators participating in the research were Allen H. Henderson, Ph.D., of Texas Wesleyan College, Elbert D. Glover, Ph.D., of East Carolina University and Arden G. Christen, D.D.S., of Indiana University School of Dentistry.

Schaefer and Dr. Lanny Close, a researcher/physician and associate professor in the Department of Otolaryngology at the health science center, both expect to see an increase in oral cancers among the young, particularly boys who play sports. (While 53 percent of the surveyed group was female, no females reported regularly using smokeless tobacco.)

"Numbers of school-age children using smokeless tobacco have risen to epidemic proportions," says Close. "With more children using these tobacco products, the incidence of mouth cancer is sure to increase."

Unfortunately, according to Close and Schaefer, cancers of the head and neck are not always easy to diagnose and may be overlooked by many dentists and physicians until they have grown to advanced stages.

Treatment depends upon the site of the cancer and the extent of the disease. "Treatment options range from simple excision of the tumor, with or without radiation therapy, to extensive surgery with loss of the tongue or larynx," says Schaefer.

Why is consumption of smokeless tobacco on the increase? One reason, according to the study, is that with the public becoming more aware of the hazards of smoking, the "tobacco manufacturers have undertaken an extensive campaign to promote the 'questionable virtues' of smokeless tobacco. These efforts appear to focus on adolescents and young adults, often associating

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celebrities and physical well-being with a traditionally unattractive habit. The impact of such advertising is reflected in the increasing sales of this product."

The study researchers say they believe this increase in smokeless tobacco consumption "can be attributed to both the public's and health professions' misconceptions that smokeless tobacco is less harmful than smoking."

Most users of smokeless tobacco, according to the study, obtained the products from convenience stores and supermarkets. Only 10 percent of the students knew it was illegal for minors to buy dipping and chewing tobacco and only 16 percent responded that it was illegal to buy cigarettes. Twenty-eight percent responded that they believed smokeless tobacco was permissible in their school and 34 percent thought cigarette smoking was allowed in school.

The children polled were all students in junior and senior high schools throughout the state. Seventy percent were from urban areas while 30 percent were from rural.

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