

News Release

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Texas Tech Physicians Experts Discuss Dangers and Tips on Overcoming Smoking, Vaping, Dipping Addictions

According to Sara Tello, a nurse practitioner at Texas Tech Physicians specializing in treating tobacco dependency, a comprehensive treatment plan and a heavy dose of compassionate support can significantly improve success rates for people trying to kick their smoking, vaping or dipping addictions.

“I don’t believe in ‘quit dates’ or making people feel stressed,” Tello said. “I don’t take away the tobacco. It’s about finding the right approach for each person. It’s a process.”

Smoking, vaping and dipping all have severe health consequences and affect multiple systems within the body.

Texas Tech Physicians specialists said the risks include:

- **Lung disease and injury:** Early exposure to cigarette smoke increases the risk of asthma, chronic cough, bronchitis and ultimately, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Smoking also is associated with forms of lung scarring. The overall impact of e-cigarette use is unknown. However, lung injury has been potentially associated with vaping. -Victor Test, M.D., Texas Tech Physicians pulmonologist
- **Heart disease and stroke:** Tobacco smoke has multiple effects on the cardiovascular system. In the long term, the arterial linings are damaged. They lose the ability to dilate and “soften” and become more vulnerable to cholesterol plaque formation and inflammation. Acutely, tobacco smoke makes platelets (the small clotting components of blood) “stickier” and more likely to form a clot, which is the proximate mechanism of many strokes and most heart attacks. -Scott Shurmur, M.D., Texas Tech Physicians cardiologist

Other health risks include:

- **Diabetes:** Nicotine, a chemical found in tobacco products, raises blood sugar. Additionally, the chemicals in cigarettes and other tobacco products also cause inflammation (an immune response). Inflammation and nicotine both make it harder for the body to regulate blood sugar. -Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- **Cancer:** Tobacco products and secondhand smoke contain chemicals that damage DNA. Tobacco use causes many types of cancer, including cancer of the lung, larynx, mouth, esophagus, throat, bladder, kidney, liver, stomach, pancreas, colon and rectum, and cervix, as well as acute myeloid leukemia. -National Cancer Institute

The National Cancer Institute has found that people who quit using tobacco products, regardless of their age, have substantial gains in life expectancy compared with those who continue. Tello said most people quickly realize health improvements as they reduce their tobacco product use.

“My patients tell me, ‘I cannot believe, even by cutting down in half, how much better I feel. I breathe better. I see better. I think better,’” she said.

Tello said when it comes to kicking the habit, it’s essential to know that only one in 10 smokers can quit cold turkey. “Tobacco companies chemically alter their tobacco with 7,000 chemicals to be as or more addictive than heroin or cocaine so that you cannot quit,” Tello said.

According to the CDC, e-cigarette aerosol generally contains fewer harmful chemicals than smoke from cigarettes. However, Tello emphasized this does not make e-cigarettes a good alternative. “The only thing safe to breathe in is air,” she said.

The psychological dependence associated with smoking, vaping or dipping also makes quitting particularly difficult. Tello recommends cognitive behavioral therapy to help patients alter triggering routines.

“It is an addiction, but it's also their best friend, their stress relief, their boredom relief and a part of their daily routine,” Tello said. “It has rewired the circuitry in the brain.”

On the clinical side, various prescription and over-the-counter treatment options are available. Tello said a tobacco cessation specialist or a physician can help determine if a combination is needed.

She explained medications such as Chantix and Wellbutrin can help bypass the brain's addiction response and moderate mood, making the person no longer want or like tobacco products.

Nicotine patches deliver a slow and steady amount of nicotine while nicotine gum, sprays and lozenges reproduce the quick dopamine hit tobacco product users experience — all without the chemically addictive additives. Tello explained these can be effective in a gradual cessation approach if used correctly.

“We know if you're grumpy or fussy, you need nicotine,” Tello said. “By far, the tobacco company's nicotine is worse. This is why patients are successful: you learn how to use these tools to satisfy the brain until you no longer smoke, vape or dip.”

Tello stressed that relapse can be a normal part of the process and encouraged patients to stay persistent. She also said it’s crucial that loved ones be supportive without judgment.

“You want the best for them. When we are hard on them, it only makes them smoke more and hide it. It's just a vicious cycle. Love them and say, ‘There's help when you're ready.’”