

From Meme to Addiction: The Hidden Dangers of Nicotine Packets By Tessah

Scrolling on our phones, standing in the checkout line, and mentioned in day-to-day conversations, we've all been exposed to Zyn and its growing list of jargon: Zynfluencers, Zynnig, Zynner, and Zynthusiast. Even as a Gen Zer, I couldn't help but simultaneously laugh and roll my eyes at the endless puns and humor surrounding a product that's steadily becoming normalized in today's youth and young adult populations. What often gets lost beneath the creativity of memes and trending social media posts, such as Josh Allen, Baker Mayfield, and Max Homa promoting its use, is the reality that nicotine pouches are not harmless. In fact, they're highly addictive, easily accessible, easily hidden, and overlooked at home and in school buildings. As Zyn gains popularity, it's worth pausing to examine the real health risks behind a trend that's been branded as clean, convenient, and cool.

In case you've joined the party late and aren't familiar with Zyn or other nicotine pouches (VELO, On!, Rogue, and FRE), here's a breakdown of the product and how they differ from traditional tobacco products. Nicotine pouches are a form of smokeless tobacco because they're not inhaled. Typically, between fifteen and twenty pouches are sold in one can, depending on the brand. The pouches themselves are about finger-tip-sized packets made from a fiber casing filled with a powdered mixture of nicotine, sweeteners, flavorings, and other chemicals. Often compared to tiny pillows, these pouches can contain anywhere from 2 mg to 20 mg of nicotine. Per Baylor, College of Medicine, "the average user consumes about half a can or eight to twelve pouches of the 6 mg nicotine pouches. This is equivalent to one to three packs of cigarettes per day." The pouch is placed between the lips and gum, where the nicotine is absorbed through the mouth. Users, AKA "Zynner", have even coined their own slang for the product, calling the pouch a "decky," and depending on the placement of the pouch, an "upper deck" or "upper-decker" if it's placed under the upper lip while a "lower deck" or "lower-decker" if it's placed beneath the lower lip.

Nebraska Legislative Bill 9 defines nicotine pouches as an alternative tobacco product. This is because, unlike traditional tobacco products, nicotine pouches do not contain actual tobacco leaves. This distinction has allowed major tobacco companies to market the products as a "safer" alternative to traditional tobacco products, and this argument has fooled our youth and young adults. (Noting, this is how tobacco companies marketed vapes between 2010 and 2020.) Another feature adding to their appeal is that nicotine pouches don't require spitting, unlike chewing tobacco, making them easier to conceal in school or home environments.

Nicotine pouches' popularity and prevalence of use have significantly increased since 2023. This could be attributed to a variety of fruity, minty, and sweet flavors that attract young individuals. Per the Tobacco Control Network, Nebraska, between 2023 and 2025, sales significantly increased: tobacco-flavored nicotine pouch sales increased from \$1,500 to \$699,000, while menthol-flavored nicotine pouch sales increased from \$1.9 million to \$6.0 million, and mint-flavored pouch sales increased from \$87.4 million to \$308.9 million. The American Lung Association reported a 641% increase in sales of the products between 2019 and 2022, but just 2.9% of U.S. adults had ever used a nicotine pouch. Signaling an increasing rate of youth nicotine use.

Much of this spike in popularity can be attributed to youth-targeted marketing tactics and social media promotions on TikTok. I encourage you to review Freezetarps Cheddy and Daddy Wellness (uses adult language) accounts to fully understand the term and role of “Zynfluencers” and the content shaping our youth’s perception of nicotine. This highlights the way tobacco companies are targeting teens and young adults.

We’ve established that pouch use is growing, so it’s important to examine the associated health risks—starting with the physiological effects of nicotine. Nicotine places significant stress on the cardiovascular system by triggering the release of adrenaline, which causes the heart to beat faster and harder while constricting blood vessels. This raises heart rate and blood pressure, restricts blood flow, and over time can lead to stiffened blood vessels and plaque buildup. These effects increase the risk of cardiovascular and vascular disease, such as stroke.

Furthermore, use is especially dangerous for individuals with or susceptible to diabetes because it promotes insulin resistance, preventing glucose from effectively entering cells. It can also directly impair the pancreas’s ability to secrete insulin, making blood sugar levels more difficult to regulate.

Additionally, nicotine use is linked to a range of gastrointestinal issues, including nausea, stomach pain, heartburn, and constipation. Long-term use may also increase the risk of developing or worsening stomach ulcers and Crohn’s disease.

Nicotine use may also have negative consequences for a person’s oral health. Use can increase susceptibility to gum problems, including inflammation, soreness, recession, and ulcers. Prolonged pouch use also raises the risk of tooth decay and cavities. New studies out of Thailand show that some users develop precancerous white patches in the mouth known as leukoplakia.

The effects that nicotine has on our neurology and behaviors are especially concerning, particularly for adolescents and young adults who are experiencing a very crucial stage of brain development and maturity. Nicotine disrupts brain development, affecting memory, attention span, and our ability to learn. Regular exposure to nicotine alters brain chemistry, fostering dependence, and increasing the risk of withdrawal symptoms such as irritability and difficulty concentrating. If you’d like a more in-depth look into nicotine’s long-term alterations to specific regions of the brain and neural pathways, the consequences to academic performance, and increased risk of developing mental health disorders, please read the Nicotine on Developing Brain research article published by Emily Castro, Shahradd Lotfipour, and France Leslie in 2023.

Lastly, the ALA published a 2022 study that found 44 nicotine pouch products were found to contain several harmful chemicals, including formaldehyde, which is a carcinogen, along with ammonia, chromium, and nickel.

In the time of a “Zyndemic” (Zyn and pandemic), research on nicotine pouches is still scarce, but the bottom line is that all tobacco and nicotine products come with serious health risks. Tobacco companies market so-called harm reduction products as “healthier alternatives”, “safe”, and “clean”, but these statements are false and lead to misconceptions about the products. These are

tactics to get youth and young adults addicted to their products at a young age to make them lifetime tobacco consumers.

A statement made by the U.S. Surgeon General found that youth use of nicotine in any form is unsafe. At SCIP, we encourage school districts to implement comprehensive tobacco use prevention curriculum and ask families to either begin or continue conversations at home about tobacco and nicotine use. This conversation does not have to be uncomfortable or accusatory. Simply asking your student what they've heard about Zyn and other nicotine pouches can begin the conversation. Setting clear expectations about tobacco and nicotine use in schools and at home sets guidelines for students, but it's also important to model the behavior you want to see. Tobacco Free Nebraska and the Nebraska Tobacco Quitline are available and offer quit kits. Local Tobacco Free Collaborations can also provide quit kits when contacted. Additional resources from Stanford Medicine's REACH Lab include free curriculums and conversation guides to help begin the conversation for all tobacco products. The Truth Initiative also provides a series of educational tools to promote prevention and cessation.

References:

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Nicotine on Developing Brain: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10392865/>
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website was referenced for health-related consequences.