History of Smokeless Tobacco

As far back 1 BCE (Before Common Era) the tobacco plant was discovered by American inhabitants. They began to find ways to use tobacco such as smoking (in a variety of ways) and chew. As time went on, a complex system of religious and political ceremonies were developed around it.

In the late 1400's, explorers such as Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci observed the American Indians using tobacco for ceremonial and medicinal purposes. Tobacco was then brought back to Europe and introduced to European royalty, lending it respectability and increasing its appeal.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries tobacco became literally a "cash-crop" and came into use as "country money" or "country pay" in the colonies.

It is interesting to note that despite it's popularity, King James I wrote a "Counterblaste to Tobacco" in 1604 in which he stated, "A custom lothsome to the eye, hatful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless." He then proceeded to raise the tobacco tax 4,000%.

During the 1800's tobacco chewing became known as the "American habit." A communal snuff box and cuspidors were even installed for members of congress, a practice which continued until 1935.

The germ theory was proved at the end of the 19th century bringing public outcry against unsanitary practices of spitting in which disease could be spread. Spitting tobacco became socially unacceptable and unlawful, especially in public places.

In the 1970's spit tobacco began to slowly shift from a product primarily used by older men to one used predominantly by young men and boys. From 1970 to 1991, the regular use of moist snuff by 18-24 year old males increased almost ten-fold from less than one percent to 6.2%. Conversely, use among males 65 and older decreased by almost half, from 4 to 2.2 percent.

Presently, 3% of adults and 8% of high school students in the U.S. are current spit tobacco users. Although prevalence rates in Utah are lower at 1.6% and 4.9% respectively, they are far from trivial. High school males have the highest spit tobacco rate of 13.6% in the nation and 7.1% in Utah. During 2005, the five largest tobacco manufacturers spent a new record of $250.79 million on smokeless tobacco advertising and promotion, versus the previous record of $238.68 million in 2001.

For a more comprehensive description of the history of tobacco please visit the Tobacco News and Information website at http://www.tobacco.org/resources/history/Tobacco_History.html

For More Information

For more information go to our website: http://www.tobaccofreeutah.org/smokeless.html

Developed by the Utah Tobacco Prevention and Control Program, Utah Department of Health. December 2007.