

Nicotine Pouches

Information Resource for Workers

What are nicotine pouches and what's in them?

Nicotine pouches are small permeable pouches containing nicotine, a mild stimulant. They are designed to be placed between the lip and gum where the nicotine is absorbed into the bloodstream. Nicotine pouches also contain microcrystalline cellulose¹, a refined wood pulp sometimes also used as a binder or filler in pharmaceutical, food and cosmetic products. Additionally, they contain additives, flavourings, and artificial sweeteners.¹ Nicotine pouches are a relatively new product, often promoted as an alternative way to consume nicotine, when compared to existing options, such as cigarettes and nicotine vaping products.



Nicotine pouch being placed in the mouth

Slang terms include lip pillow, lip cushion, or upper or lower decky (referring to placement on the upper or lower gum).

Are snus and nicotine pouches the same?

Whilst snus (pronounced "snoose") and nicotine pouches look similar and are used in the same way, they are different. Snus contains tobacco while nicotine pouches do not. Snus, like all oral tobacco products, have been banned in Australia since 1991 due to concerns over the health risks associated with tobacco use. However, snus is legal in other countries and has been popular in Sweden since the 1970s.



Snus

Nicotine pouch

What are the laws around nicotine pouches in Australia?

Nicotine pouches aren't subject to the same ban as snus as they don't contain tobacco. In Australia, nicotine pouches are classified as therapeutic goods. Therefore, to be legally sold, they must be listed on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods or approved by the TGA (Therapeutic Goods Administration). There are no nicotine pouches currently approved. However, consumers can legally import nicotine pouches through the Personal Importation Scheme with a prescription.²

In Australia, retailers such as tobacconists and convenience stores are prohibited from selling nicotine pouches. However, data from a recent survey reveals that people are obtaining these products through local stores, online platforms, or from friends and family.³

It is unlawful to advertise nicotine pouches in Australia.

More information can be found at: <https://www.tga.gov.au/products/unapproved-therapeutic-goods/vaping-hub/nicotine-pouches>

Unlawful sales or advertising of therapeutic goods can be reported here:
<https://www.tga.gov.au/how-we-regulate/compliance-and-enforcement-hub/report-breach>

Risks and benefits

As these products are relatively new, there is insufficient evidence to confidently state their risks or benefits. More independent research is needed. Below is an outline of some of the ongoing discussions about nicotine pouches.

Possible risks

Nicotine pouches and young people

Many brands of nicotine pouches are owned by big tobacco companies. There are concerns these companies are using nicotine pouches to get young people dependent on nicotine, as some products contain high nicotine concentrations.^{4,5} Additionally, people are concerned that the flavours and discreet nature of these products, plus promotion on social media, will increase interest.

Potential for oral health risks

Concerns have also been raised about possible oral health risks of nicotine pouches. Some people experience short-term effects such as mouth lesions, a sore mouth, or throat.⁶ It's possible prolonged use could lead to more serious oral health issues but there is insufficient evidence to support this.⁶

Possible benefits

Potential for reduced harm

Compared to inhaled nicotine products like cigarettes or vapes, nicotine pouches may have lower risk of health harms. The reasoning behind this is:



Tobacco smoking is the leading cause of preventable disease and death worldwide.⁷ Nicotine is the substance in tobacco people become dependent on, but not what causes most health harms. Most harms are caused by combustion (burning) of the tobacco and inhaling the toxins created from this process.⁷



Nicotine vaping products are considered less harmful than tobacco smoking.⁷ This is largely due to the elimination of combusted tobacco. However, the long-term harms associated with heating other ingredients and inhaling the aerosol is currently unknown.



Nicotine pouches don't contain tobacco, there is no combustion or heating and no inhalation into the lungs. Therefore, when compared to smoking tobacco or vaping nicotine, nicotine pouches may be less harmful.

However, there is currently insufficient evidence evaluating the overall health effects of nicotine pouches. Some of the research that does exist was funded by tobacco companies. Therefore, more independent research is required.⁸

Importantly, any risk reduction from using nicotine pouches would only be experienced by people who already use nicotine products like vapes or cigarettes. People who don't use these products would be increasing their risk of harm by using nicotine pouches.

Potential smoking/vaping cessation aid

It has been suggested that the different strengths, flavours, and discreet nature of these products may make them appealing and effective as a smoking/vaping cessation aid. Given the serious health risks linked to tobacco smoking, there is considerable interest in products that could help reduce the burden of tobacco-related diseases. More recently, this interest has expanded to products that may also help curb vaping.⁷ Whilst nicotine pouches have the potential to serve as a smoking/vaping cessation tool or harm reduction strategy, there remains significant uncertainty about their safety and effectiveness for this use.⁷ A Cochrane review will be evaluating this topic (search "Cochrane library - Oral nicotine pouches for cessation or reduction of use of other tobacco or nicotine products" for more information).

What's next?

In the coming months and years, we'll likely hear more about nicotine pouches. It is encouraged that you avoid sensationalist and often misleading media reports. Instead, read the original research and critically analyse the findings. Be sure to check authors and funding source, as any research funded by tobacco companies should be considered with caution.