FDA Says Snus and Other Smokeless Tobacco Products Are Safer Than Cigarettes

Swedish Match will be able to advertise its pouches as posing a lower risk of lung cancer and other illnesses than cigarettes.

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Health regulators at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have declared snus, a Swedish style of smokeless tobacco, to be less harmful than cigarettes. The announcement makes Swedish Match the first so-called reduced-risk tobacco product ever sanctioned by the FDA.

The move is intended to help inform smokers of less risky options than cigarettes—but does not mean the tobacco pouches are completely safe, The Associated Press reports.

Sold in the United States by the company Swedish Match, the pouches contain ground tobacco that is placed between the cheek and gums to absorb nicotine. Unlike that of chewing tobacco, the liquid from snus (pronounced “snoose”) can be swallowed. The tobacco in the products is also pasteurized, not fermented, and population-level data show that it’s linked to much lower levels of lung cancer, emphysema and other smoking-related illnesses than cigarettes.

It will allow the company to advertise its products as safer than cigarettes; however, the pouches will still carry warnings that they can cause mouth cancer, gum disease and tooth loss.

“Anyone who does not currently use tobacco products, especially youth, should refrain from doing so,” said FDA Commissioner Ned Sharpless in a recent statement about the agency’s decision.

The move is a major victory for some public health experts, who have long argued that alternatives such as pouches could benefit Americans who are unable or unwilling to quit cigarettes but want a safer option. The decision also arrives as tobacco companies are looking for new products to sell as cigarette use continues to decline.

The FDA says it’s also considering other reduced-risk products, including a nonburning cigarette alternative made by Phillip Morris International. As for e-cigarettes, agency officials say they have not yet been scientifically deemed to be a lower-risk alternative and will likely not make the cut anytime soon.

To learn more about the health risks of vaping, click here.

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