

## Tony Gwynn's Battle With Cancer Rehashes Chewing Tobacco Debate



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Will there come a point when this is banned from the field-of-play in MLB?

In early October, Hall of Fame outfielder **Tony Gwynn** was diagnosed with cancer of the parotid salivary gland. **Gwynn** suspects his cancer was caused by years and years of chewing smokeless tobacco. The problem, if you want to call it that, of chewing tobacco use in Major League Baseball has been explored for years – even by congress. In April, House Energy and Commerce committee chairman Henry Waxman and Health Subcommittee chairman Frank Pallone [called on baseball to ban chewing tobacco](#).

During his opening statement, Waxman said: "We don't let baseball players go stand out there in the field and drink beer. Major League Baseball won't allow them to step on the field and smoke cigarettes. So why should they be out there on the field -- in sight of all their fans on television and at the ballpark -- using smokeless tobacco?"

Studies have shown that somewhere between 30 and 50 percent of major league ballplayers chew tobacco. If any real attempts have been made to stop chewing, none have come to fruition. Which is somewhat surprising seeing that the use of smokeless tobacco has been banned at all levels of the minor leagues since 1993. It would have been plausible to think, similarly to the view on implementing an HGH test in the minors, that eventually the ban would make its way to the big leagues.

Seventeen years later, the ban hasn't reach the majors. A minor league player can face anywhere from a \$100 to \$1,000 fine. In 2008, [Rod Gardenhire](#) said the ban in the minor leagues, along with increased education, has caused reduced usage in the majors. Matt Antonelli, an infielder who has spent five seasons in the San Diego

Padres' minor league system, says the ban and fine doesn't scare players away from using chew.

"If you are caught with a dip can or chewing tobacco on you or in your mouth, you're fined a pretty hefty amount of money," Antonelli told [BizofBaseball.com](#). "This still doesn't stop a lot of players from doing it. Maybe it stops them from chewing while playing in a game, but they will continue to chew and dip before and after the game, and away from the field."

Major League Baseball VP of public relations Pat Courtney reaffirmed Gardenhire's comments via [MLB.com](#) saying "We are pleased that our Minor League tobacco policy is having an impact on current use in the Major Leagues. By preventing use throughout the Minor Leagues, our hope was that players would not get into the habit of using during games."

The ban may help to some extent, as does increasing players' education about chewing tobacco, but usage often starts well before players make it to the minor leagues, many start in college or high school.

According to [KidsHealth.org](#), 20 percent of high school boys use smokeless tobacco, and by the age of 21, between 12 and 14 million people chew tobacco, most of which who started before age 13.

Bill Rogan, who broadcast minor league baseball for five years, wrote in his blog that the minor league ban does not affect usage. "Minor league baseball likes to thrust its chest out by claiming they have banned and eliminated chewing tobacco. Bullspit," Rogan wrote after hearing news of Gwynn's cancer. "Chewing tobacco is very prevalent in the minors. I saw it first hand when I announced minor league ball for five seasons. Guys may not chew it on the field or in the dugout. But they chew it everywhere else."

Studies and anecdotal evidence from the major leagues both are telling us there's a reduction in chewing today from, say, 20 years ago. And, an important figure in baseball such as Gwynn speaking out may help some quit or decide not to try chewing tobacco, but it isn't going away. During TBS's broadcast of the American League Championship Series, New York Yankees' pitcher AJ Burnett was shown several times putting tobacco in his lip and spitting.

Seeing big league players chew influences young players the same way they would imitate a Derek Jeter jump toss or Ken Griffey Jr. swing. MLB could insist networks not show players chewing tobacco in the dugout in the same way they insist on managers begrudgingly answer questions midway through the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning.

Antonelli said that the key to reducing usage is informing players of the potential life-threatening effects. "I think as long as you make the players aware of the risks of using chewing tobacco, which is already been implemented over the past few years, the decision to continue with the use of it is up to each player."

Though Antonelli does not chew, he said he does not have a problem with players using chewing tobacco.

"I think most players that do use chewing tobacco understand that it probably isn't the best thing in the world for you," he said. "But just like smoking, drinking, and a whole lot of other things in this world, some people will choose to do them regardless."



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