

## Tobacco gel rubs smokers every way

Jean Marbella

June 26, 2007

He rubbed the tobacco-infused gel on his hands. Sniffed them, even licked them at one point. Then he tried another application.

"I could definitely still smoke a cigarette now," Mark Hemmis said.

That would make the score - lighting up: 1, rubbing it on: 0.

Hemmis is a smoker who agreed to test Nicogel, a newly introduced product that is supposed to ease the craving for cigarettes, at least temporarily, until you can get to one of the fewer and fewer places where smoking is still allowed. As the owner of the Phoenix Emporium bar and restaurant in Ellicott City, Hemmis was particularly interested in the gel - his place had to go smoke-free when the Howard County ban went into effect on the first of this month, eight months before a new statewide ban.

Such bans delight the makers of Nicogel, which was first sold in England in December 2005, is available in more than 50 countries and now has been introduced in the U.S. Nicogel's makers say the gel, which contains a liquefied extract of tobacco, is absorbed through the skin and gives you the feeling of having just smoked a cigarette - thus, the theory goes, cutting the craving for an actual one. Each application of the gel contains the equivalent of about a tenth of the tobacco found in a cigarette, and conveying it transdermally into the body is safer than burning and inhaling it, Nicogel USA President Bill Whalen said.

Whalen said the gel differs from a nicotine patch in that it contains all the ingredients in tobacco rather than just the nicotine. "A cigarette smoker is used to getting more than just nicotine," he said. "It would be like a chocolate cake without sugar."

And, because Nicogel is sold as a tobacco replacement rather than a smoking-cessation aid - like the nicotine patch or gum - it didn't need FDA approval, Whalen said.

But the gel has created controversy nonetheless among anti-smoking advocates, such as the American Cancer Society, which says that no independent studies have been done to support Nicogel's claims that it is safe and effective. Additionally, Thomas J. Glynn, the society's director of cancer science and trends, said in a prepared statement, that a "bridge" product like Nicogel might "thwart the full effectiveness of the smoke-free laws by encouraging current smokers to continue, rather than quit, smoking."

What I found yesterday, in a quick and decidedly nonscientific survey, is that even if Nicogel is successful in reducing the physical craving for tobacco, I'm not sure it can address all the other aspects that make smoking so tough to give up.

I know it's bad for you and anyone around you, and I have no desire to add another bad habit to the ones I already have, but sometimes I think smokers look like they're kind of having fun - gathered outside their offices on breaks or outside restaurants that ban it, sharing lights and small talk. I almost felt like a smoker myself yesterday as I searched some of them out, armed with the Nicogel that is very cleverly packaged in a box that looks like a cigarette pack.

Sitting on a bench on an outdoor plaza in downtown Baltimore, Glenn Clark, an administrator with a financial firm, was about to light up a cigarette when I asked him if he'd try Nicogel instead. He did, and put away the second cigarette he was going to have on this particular break.

But it might not have been the Nicogel.

"I was only going to smoke one because she was smoking one," he said of a plaza buddy who had finished her cigarette and headed back inside while Clark rubbed on the gel.

"I like the idea," Clark said of the gel, "and for health reasons, I would like to stop smoking. But the problem is, I like to smoke.

"It's the routine," he said. "You wake up, take a shower, have coffee, and the cigarette falls right in there."

The approaching statewide ban doesn't cause him much anxiety because he's largely an outdoor smoker at this point, even at home, where he ducks out to his covered porch when he wants a cigarette.

Eric Eason groaned when I approached him with my Nicogel experiment - he didn't want to not want a cigarette. He's a waiter, and he enjoys a smoke at 11 a.m. and then again at 2:30 p.m., bracketing the lunch rush. If the gel were to work, well, it would kind of ruin his post-rush reward.

Gamely, though, he rubs the gel on his hands, and - no surprise - declares he still wants a cigarette. "And it still tastes the same," he says, happily blowing the smoke through his nose.

Hammis, the Phoenix owner, said that while he opposed the smoking ban, he couldn't really argue against it at this point. "It's good for public health," he said.

As for his own, he finds that he still smokes, but less since he has to pop outside. He'll smoke about half of a cigarette, then remember some work he has to get done inside the bar, so he'll snuff it out without finishing it.

(By the way, I think indoor smoking bans aren't helping some people - I saw a guy who picked through the ashtrays outside one downtown building and seemed happy with the half-cigarettes that rushed office workers didn't have time to finish before heading back inside.)

While Hemmis was intrigued by Nicogel - he could envision offering it to customers who might otherwise leave to go smoke - he thought it was too expensive. (I paid \$6.99 for a 10-application box.)

"It's a novelty," he said. "It's like the 'Alcohol Without Liquid' machine that we had for a little while."

Yes, the infamous AWOL machine, which vaporized alcohol for inhaling rather than imbibing, and purported to give its users a more potent but less caloric buzz. Until, that is, state legislators heard about it.

"They're banned now, too," Hemmis said.