
Etiquette Can Be Murder

I love you too well to disguise my feelings on the subject. I could not possibly constantly love a tobacco-user.

Thomas E. Hill, *The Essential Handbook of Victorian Etiquette*, Circa 1873

Snuff and Snus

A good friend of mine asked if there are etiquette rules for the use of snuff and chewing tobacco. Since my only experience with smokeless tobacco is a vague memory of my grandfather carrying around a pouch of Red Man and a Styrofoam cup to spit the juices in, I had to do some research.

First, I looked up the basic terminology. According to the National Cancer Institute ([Smokeless Tobacco and Cancer](#), NCI, 2010), there are two main types of smokeless tobacco:

- **Chewing tobacco**, which is available as loose leaves, plugs (bricks), or twists of rope. A piece of tobacco is placed between the cheek and lower lip, typically toward the back of the mouth. It is either chewed or held in place. Saliva is spit or swallowed.
- **Snuff**, which is finely cut or powdered tobacco. It may be sold in different scents and flavors. It is packaged moist or dry; most American snuff is moist. It is available loose, in dissolvable lozenges or strips, or in small pouches similar to tea bags. The user places a pinch or pouch of moist snuff between the cheek and gums or behind the upper or lower lip. Another name for moist snuff is snus (pronounced “snoose”). Some people inhale dry snuff into the nose.



Next, I wondered why anyone would want to use smokeless tobacco today, because although it is considered safer than smoking, it is also addictive and presents major health risks, including causing certain cancers. (Not to mention the so-called “gross factor” of having to manage and dispose of the saliva, which is a major turn-off for many non-users.)

Currently it seems that most people use “chaw” for pleasure, as an aid in attempts to quit smoking, or as a way to take in nicotine in situations where smoking is not allowed.

Nicotine in chewing tobacco is absorbed through the lining of the mouth. And as for pleasure use, *brobible* claims that: “Once absorbed, the ‘chewer’ will experience a significant head buzz; your head will soon feel like it is attached by a string and you’re blissfully floating while firmly grounded” ([The Bro’s Guide To Chewing Tobacco: What You Need To Know](#), Bobby Box, 2022).

Since I’m not sure that sounded altogether pleasant, I was also curious about who first got the idea of chewing tobacco. (I mean, who on earth decided that they would chew a tobacco leaf, hold it in their mouth instead of swallowing, and spit out the resulting juices?) And how did it become popular?

I learned that tobacco is native to both North and South America, where it has been used for religious and ceremonial purposes for centuries. For European use, “It was believed to have been discovered in 1499 when Amerigo Vespucci found indigenous tribes chewing on a green herb that they used to quench their thirst. They would also use it to quell hunger, and whiten their teeth. This is likely the first recorded instance of chewing tobacco” ([A History of the Culture and Use of Tobacco in the New World](#), *blackbuffalo*, 2022).



“Tobacco was first imported into Europe during the 16th century and snuff (a ground form of tobacco) was initially used in late 17th-century Europe for medicinal purposes. The taking of snuff for pleasure later developed into a fashion amongst European royalty and aristocracy and by the 18th century, snuff had become the tobacco product of choice among Europe’s elite” ([Considerations on a Handkerchief • V&A Blog](#), Dawn Hoskin, 2013).



Snuff was used by both men and women, and became so common that elaborate snuff boxes were developed to hold a user’s daily supply. “Small or large, for the pocket or the table. These little antique snuff boxes were needed to keep the snuff airtight until use and small amounts were carried around. Some boxes were so small that they literally only carried around enough for a ‘pinch of snuff’” ([Antique Snuff Boxes and Social Etiquette](#), Opus Antiques, 2017).

However, by the 1800s the use of smokeless tobacco had fallen out of favor, and Hill’s book, *The Essential Handbook of Victorian Etiquette*, encourages young women not to marry a “tobacco-user.” It even gives a sample letter for turning down a proposal from “a Young Man that Uses Tobacco.”

The letter lists the reasons for refusing a tobacco-chewing suitor, including the unnecessary expense of tobacco use, and the notion that it deadens the taste buds and so leads the user to

crave stronger and stronger drink, leading to drunkenness. The lady is also encouraged to add that “It would surround me with filth...by the constant expectoration of saliva” and that “I could not endure the fetid breath of the tobacco-user.” After sending the letter, she was evidently supposed to cut off all contact with the unfortunate young man.

It is no wonder that the use of smokeless tobacco dropped in the succeeding years. However, use is actually increasing again today, since many nicotine addicts now use snuff or snus to replace cigars and cigarettes, since they can no longer smoke anywhere they wish.

In doing my research, I finally got around to today’s etiquette for using snuff, and found that although snuff is never mentioned in my modern etiquette books, there are some internet guidelines ([Beginner's Guide to Snuff Tobacco in 2018](#), Wilsons & Co, 2018). They are:



- Sniff, don't snort!
- Less is more. Take snuff in small portions, no larger than the size of a pea.
- Blow your nose whenever you feel you need to; avoid snuff build up.
- Try using a snuff bullet to sniff easily and discreetly.
- Expect some sneezing. This is okay, providing you use a tissue!

There are also guidelines for using chewing tobacco:

- Always carry a receptacle to spit your saliva into, such as a water bottle with a lid so that it cannot spill.
- Avoid using smokeless tobacco in front of others, especially in situations where it might be considered impolite.
- Treat it similarly to other behaviors that are best done privately, such as clipping toenails or personal grooming at the dinner table.
- If someone near you is using smokeless tobacco, consider quietly moving away instead of making a big deal about it.
- Publicly shaming someone for discreetly using smokeless tobacco is not appropriate.

Researching “chew” put me on quite an educational journey, and I had fun with it. So, thanks to Ann Sayre for asking the question!

Have you ever used smokeless tobacco? What is it really like? Drop me a line at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and let me know.

A Reader Asks

Last month I asked if my newsletter readers had any etiquette questions, and a friend requested information about the etiquette rules for chewing gum and tobacco. Smokeless tobacco is covered above, and the only rules I found for using gum in my etiquette books is that it “should never be done except in private” and that the gum should be wrapped and disposed of properly when you are finished with it (*Vogue's Book of Etiquette*, 1969).

The internet is slightly more forgiving of gum use in public, and a more current article by the “Etiquette Divas” states that “Chewing gum used to be considered rude, but it has now become quite commonplace. However, there are ways and whens (*sic*) to chew gum appropriately.



“It’s OK to chew gum with friends or on the job, just as long as you do it quietly. But bubble-popping, smacking sounds are rude and gross. It makes you look sloppy and disrespectful.

“Avoid chewing gum during a job interview or formal gatherings, and don’t chew gum at the table. It’s like wearing a shabby t-shirt to a nice dinner party. And you should keep a tissue or wrapper handy for getting rid of your gum when necessary” ([Is it Polite to Chew Gum?](#),

Etiquette Divas, 2022).

As for dealing with loud gum chewers, *USA Today* suggests that you either leave, politely address the problem with the chewer, or invest in headphones ([Gum Chewing Etiquette, USA Today](#)). And since over 160 million Americans chewed gum in 2020 ([19 Chewing Gum Statistics You've Never Heard About, soocial, 2024](#)), the odds of encountering a loud chewer seem pretty high!

This was another interesting topic to research, so if anyone would like more specifics, let me know.

Note to readers: I enjoy reading etiquette books for fun, since they give an entertaining look at the social customs of different time periods. I actually have quite a collection of manuals, which range in coverage from old-world boudoir etiquette to internet dating advice. So, if you have any questions about current or old-fashioned etiquette, drop me a note at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#) and I’ll do my best to look up an answer. And you might even make it into my next newsletter!

Latest News

After last month’s newsletter on Japanese toilets, I heard from a couple of readers who actually

own the washlet-style units, and who extolled their virtues. Evidently you can order them with a remote control, hot and cold water options, an LED light to lead you to the bowl in the dark, water pressure adjustment controls, and various other bells and whistles. My readers loved the washlets, and they reminded me that having the dryer feature was a real boon during the pandemic when toilet paper was in short supply. Now I think I may have to try one!

This month I was interviewed by Meredith Rankin for her Substack newsletter. Meredith is a fellow author who I met through a class offered by Sisters in Crime, and we chatted about writing, crime, etiquette, and entering contests. It was a lot of fun, and I hope you'll check it out at [Meredith's Substack | Meredith Rankin](#).

As for future plans, I'll be attending the Killer Nashville conference in late August, as well as taking a course on how to prepare an author media kit. I will also be working on future newsletters. As always, if you know anyone who might be interested in signing up for my email list, please pass along my opt-in information at: [Newsletter - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

I would love for my readers to get in touch! You can drop me a note anytime on my contact page at [Contact - Lucinda Gerlitz](#).

I hope you all have a great month. And for my usual cat photo, here is a picture of Doofus (my sister's cat), who didn't enjoy his bath:

