



Key Facts about Bush Tobacco

What is bush tobacco?

Bush tobacco is a native Australian tobacco plant. It grows in Queensland, the Northern Territory's Central Desert Region and Western Australia. It is known by different names including Pituri, Pitjuri and Mingkulpa. The plant's leaves and stems are dried and mixed with ash. This mixture is moistened with saliva, then moulded into a small package known as a quid. The quid is chewed and held in the mouth for long periods of time. Sometimes it is placed behind the ear to be absorbed through the skin. Mixing the leaf with the ash helps nicotine enter the body.

Is bush tobacco commonly used?

Bush tobacco use is less common than smoking commercial cigarettes. However, in some Aboriginal communities, it is used often. Participants of a study in remote central Australian were clear that 'everyone uses it', including children. Children were said to start chewing between 5 and 7 years of age.

Why do people use bush tobacco?

Nicotine

The main reason bush tobacco is used is for its nicotine.

Medicinal

In some communities, bush tobacco is used to treat ringworm, insect bites, snake and scorpion bites, scabies and skin sores.

Social and cultural

Bush tobacco has a significant social and cultural role connecting Aboriginal people to each other, their culture, land and community. Bush tobacco is sometimes bought and sold, but more frequently is gifted to family or friends as a sign of 'being loved'.

People who use bush tobacco have also said it brings a sense of calm and relaxation, improves concentration, reduces hunger, overcomes thirst, brings sleep and tastes good.

What is best practice population health promotion for bush tobacco?

Many users do not consider bush tobacco to be a tobacco plant. They do not believe it is harmful in the same way as commercial tobacco. This means that during health assessment, users may deny tobacco use and may not consider health information about smoked tobacco to be relevant to them. Relying on existing health messaging around commercial tobacco is unlikely to be effective. Health messages must respect the local knowledge system and beliefs about the role of bush tobacco.

Further reading

Ratsch, AM, Mason, A, Rive, L, Bogossian, FE, Steadman, KJ (2017). The Pituri Learning Circle: central Australian Aboriginal women's knowledge and practices around the use of *Nicotiana* spp. as a chewing tobacco. *Rural and Remote Health*, 17.

What are the health effects?

We are still learning about the health impacts of bush tobacco. There is some evidence that health outcomes are similar to those of smoking commercial tobacco. There are 22 different types of bush tobacco. These are all a little bit different in chemical composition and how much nicotine they contain. What we do know is that:

- The leaves contain toxic chemicals, including some known to cause cancer
- Mixing the tobacco leaf with ash might produce other harmful compounds
- Using bush tobacco while pregnant increases the risk of premature birth and lower birth weight babies
- A study of pregnant women showed those who chewed bush tobacco had higher levels of nicotine in their body than mothers-to-be who smoked
- Bush tobacco is addictive (withdrawal symptoms can include cravings, headaches, anxiety and grumpiness)
- Overdose can cause dizziness, drowsiness and sickness.

