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Tobacco Use Harms Military Readiness, Official Says

By Claudette Roulo
DoD News, Defense Media Activity

WASHINGTON, Aug. 12, 2014 – Because tobacco use is harmful to military readiness, the Defense Department has an added responsibility to curb its use, the assistant secretary of defense for health affairs said today, noting that service members are more likely to use tobacco products than civilians.

Tobacco use can lead to excess oral cavity disease and morbidity, Dr. Jonathan Woodson said.

"It affects dental readiness, which is very important in making sure that we have a healthy force ready to deploy for the nation's defense," he explained.

"We know that tobacco use figures prominently in development of cancers, but also there are many other health related consequences -- [decreased] lung function, heart function, excess heart attacks and strokes," Woodson said. "And so it's something that we really do need to concentrate on as a public health issue for the services."

In the coming decades, 171,000 of the personnel currently serving are likely to die prematurely due to tobacco use, he added.

"We have an extra responsibility to address this problem," Woodson said. "The way I look at it is, just as we would leave nobody behind in the combat zone [and] we expend every effort to save the life of a battle buddy that's on our right or on our left, we need to do the same with tobacco use."

The Military Health System is partnered with tobacco cessation programs Action to Quit and U Can Quit 2 and has developed Operation Live Well, all in an effort to provide encouragement and resources to tobacco users looking to quit, he said.

The campaigns are more than just buzzwords, Woodson said.

"It's about a concentrated effort to support the health of the men and women who serve -- both immediately and long-term -- by reducing the use of tobacco products," he said.

This effort isn't about denying the rights of service members, Woodson stressed, rather "it is about encouraging and creating environments to make healthy choices."

Yet, "it's also about protecting the nonsmoker," he added. "We know the issues that occur in terms of health-related effects from ambient smoke for nonsmokers and so we need to look at the issue of smoking in housing and smoking on installations, again, to protect the health of the entire force."

Tobacco use is pernicious, Woodson said. "Individuals start and then they get addicted to it and then it becomes a lifelong habit," with terrible health consequences, he said.

"You know, at one point in our history when we didn't know so much about tobacco and its health effects, we actually supplied cigarettes in our rations," Woodson said. But, he noted, as science demonstrated the harmful effects of tobacco use, the department reformed its policies to better serve the health of service members.

And concern for the health of the entire force is at the heart of the Military Health System's efforts, Woodson said.

"We need to address all potentially health-related habits that adversely affect the health of our servicemen and women," he said. "...We want to encourage the development of more smoke-free installations, particularly where children learn, work and play -- that's very important for their health -- but also we want to encourage ... healthy behaviors."

(Follow Claudette Roulo on Twitter: @roulododnews)

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Biographies:

[Dr. Jonathan Woodson](#)

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