

Information Sheet for Health Professionals: Betel Quid

What is Betel Quid?

In its most basic form betel quid consist of betel leaf, areca nut, slaked lime, various spices¹ and may contain tobacco. The quid is placed in the mouth (usually between the gum and cheek) and chewed.

Chewing betel quid is a cultural practice in many parts of Asia and plays an important role in social customs, religious practices and cultural rituals. Around 10% of the world's population (600 million people) chew betel quid in some form. This makes areca nut the 4th most widely-used psychoactive substance, after nicotine, alcohol and caffeine.¹ Betel quid with or without tobacco has been declared as a group 1 carcinogen to humans.²

Why is it a concern in Australia?

A proportion of people migrating from Asian countries where Betel Quid is chewed, have continued this practice. There are many beliefs surrounding betel quid that make it appealing, but there is now emerging evidence that associates the practice, even without tobacco with a range of health consequences.³

Health consequences and issues associated with Betel Quid:

- Mouth ulcers and gum disease⁴
- Oral precancerous lesions, including erythroplakia and leukoplakia⁵
- Oral submucous fibrosis⁵
- Oral cancers (predominantly of the lip, mouth, tongue, and pharynx)⁵
- Cancer of the esophagus⁵
- Peptic ulcers⁴
- Increased risk of heart disease⁴
- Increased risk of having a low birth-weight infant⁵

Australian Drug Foundation recommends the following for preventing and reducing harm⁶:

- The safest way to avoid problems with betel quid chewing is to avoid use.
- If you use betel quid regularly, try to reduce the amount you're chewing, and take breaks in between.
- Avoid using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs during or after chewing betel quid. Mixing drugs can be dangerous.
- If you smoke, limit the number of cigarettes you smoke while chewing betel quid.
- Try to avoid chewing betel quid late at night, and never take sleeping pills unless prescribed by your doctor.
- Try to avoid holding the betel quid in your cheek for a long time, as this can increase your risk of getting an oral infection.
- Have regular oral and physical health check up.
- Maintain good oral hygiene including twice daily brushing, flossing and rinsing of the mouth.

The role of the Health Professional

Even small interventions, such as asking people if they want to give up smoking or talking them through the options for quitting can make the difference. Research indicates that doctors can contribute to a reduction in the rates of smoking⁷. It's likely that prompting and support from a trusted health care professional about betel quid may have a similar benefit.

References:

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4. Australian Drug Foundation, 2012, Betel Quid Facts, <http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/drug-facts/betel-nut>, accessed February 2013.
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7. Cancer Council NSW (2008) Clearing the smoke: Best practice smoking cessation strategies for people with multiple disadvantage, Sydney, Cancer Council NSW.