

BY PAT HAGAN

A REVOLUTIONARY new gel that is rubbed into hands just like liquid soap could help smokers cut down or even quit the habit.

Just a few squirts during the day can give smokers the kick they get from cigarettes without the damaging effects of tobacco.

Called Nicogel, it is being seen as an alternative to existing nicotine replacement therapies, such as patches, chewing gum or nasal sprays. Many smokers desperate to quit complain that nicotine gum tastes foul and patches tend to fall off when the user gets hot or sweaty. But the gel, which is odourless, dries in less than 60 seconds and leaves no residue. The liquid is made from natural extracts of the tobacco plant but treated to remove as much of the nicotine as possible. In effect, it is a gel-based cigarette.

Although it is being marketed as a cigarette substitute to help smokers get by in non-smoking environments, anecdotal evidence suggests Nicogel is helping some to quit altogether.

'Our gel is very different to gums and patches,' says Dr John Walters, a biochemist involved in the development of Nicogel. 'They con-

The new smoking cure: Rub tobacco gel on your hands

tain only purified nicotine, which is just one component of the tobacco plant. We take the whole plant and put it through a pressurised extraction process to strip out most of the nicotine.

'What's left is all the other active constituents in tobacco, such as cotinine; some recent studies suggest cotinine is responsible for suppressing cravings in the brain.'

Although smoking is in decline in Britain, tobacco still kills an estimated 114,000 people every year — the equivalent of more than 300 a day.

One in five of all deaths is linked to smoking and experts claim half of all regular users will eventually be killed by their habit.

A recent study also showed passive smoking is a much bigger killer than had been previously thought, claiming the lives of 11,000 people a year in the UK.

The Government has set a target of reducing the number of

people smoking from the current level of 26 per cent to 21 per cent by 2010.

But despite attempts to promote the use of nicotine replacement therapy on the NHS, concerns remain that teenagers — particularly young girls — continue to take up the habit.

One in ten girls aged 11 to 15 regularly use tobacco. A recent study also showed that women find it much harder to quit than men.

THE Department Of Health recently pledged to make nicotine patches and gum more freely available to teenagers to wear them off cigarettes. But Nicogel Ltd, the company behind the new gel, believes its product could prove to be a more practical alternative for millions of smokers.

'We have given it to around 200 people to use in their workplace or anywhere else where they are not allowed to smoke, such as in restaurants or on airplanes,' says Dr Walters. 'Most of them were smoking at least 20 a day. But with

a few regular squirts of Nicogel, more than three-quarters of them quickly dropped to between seven and 11 cigarettes a day.

'We are marketing this as a cigarette replacement product. But if it helps people quit, then even better.'

The gel works by allowing active ingredients from the tobacco plant extracts to seep through the skin and into the bloodstream, providing a kick that takes a smoker's thoughts off the need for a cigarette.

Dr Walters claims it takes less than a minute for the active ingredients in the gel to reach the brain.

For 80 per cent of heavy smokers — those on more than 20 a day — the effects last for two to four hours. Those on a dozen or less a day continue to feel free of cravings for up to six hours.

'We have found a lot of 18 to 25-year-old women using it because they don't want to stink of smoke or be seen chewing gum,' Dr Walters adds.

The gel, which costs £9.99 for a bottle equivalent to 50 cigarettes, is stocked by High Street stores such as Tesco, Superdrug and Morrisons. But it is not recommended for pregnant women or those under 16.



Picture: ANNA BRAITHWAITE

ANDREW WADSWORTH (above), from London, turned to the gel as a last resort when he became desperate to break his smoking habit.

The 35-year-old, who is a partner in a graphic design firm, was on 60 a day.

His habit was partly fed by the fact that he worked in an industry where entertaining and socialising with clients is fundamental to business.

'I've tried various brands of gum but they all taste horrible and I found that the patches just kept falling off,' says Andrew.

In November, he began rubbing Nicogel into his hands whenever anyone around him lit up. Within three weeks he was down to a couple of cigarettes a day and soon he quit completely.

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