

FAR FROM SAFE

Why Hookah Use Needs Greater Attention

Hookah use carries many of the same health risks as cigarette smoking.

Hookah smoking appears to be associated with lung cancer, respiratory disease, and low birth weight in babies.¹¹ Changes measured in the amount of air moved in and out of the lungs when smokers breathe suggest that cigarette smoking and hookah smoking have similar effects on a person's breathing.^{12, 13} The combination of charcoal and tobacco is unique to hookah smoking and the charcoal has its own set of health effects in addition to the health effects associated with tobacco use.^{14, 12} Additionally, the use of shared mouthpieces during smoking sessions can spread infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, herpes, influenza, and hepatitis.¹⁴

Hookah smokers may be exposed to more nicotine than cigarette smokers.

Many users think hookah smoking is less addictive and exposes them to less nicotine than cigarette smoking.^{2, 15} As research on the health effects of waterpipe smoking increases, studies suggest hookah smokers may inhale larger amounts of smoke than cigarette smokers during a single smoking session.^{7, 11} Hookah smoking sessions are generally longer (1/2 hour or more) which results in considerably greater nicotine exposure.^{16, 5} In one study that pooled results from other similar studies looking at cotinine (a by-product of nicotine in urine and blood), researchers estimated daily waterpipe use to be equivalent to smoking 10 cigarettes a day.¹⁶ When smoking a hookah, very little nicotine is filtered out when the smoke passes through the water in the pipe, with less than a five percent decrease observed.¹⁶

Increased availability and flavored tobacco make hookah use attractive, especially to youth and young adults.

A recent review of the global waterpipe smoking trend suggests hookah use may "represent the second global tobacco epidemic since the cigarette."⁷ Hookahs are often smoked in private homes. Becoming increasingly common is patrons renting hookahs and purchasing flavored tobacco in public places such as bars, cafes, and lounges.^{5, 2, 6} Two-thirds of states have hookah bars and cafes.¹² Many of these establishments are located near college campuses and students can purchase pipes and accessories online.^{5, 2, 6} Additionally, some hookah establishments can cater to youth under the age of 21 as long as alcohol is not served.

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Why Hookah Use Needs Greater Attention *(continued)*

Youth and young adults perceive hookah use as less dangerous than smoking cigarettes.

The increasing popularity of hookah smoking is in part driven by the social context in which use occurs (e.g., among friends in popular social settings), the attractive flavors used in the tobacco mixtures and the perception that it is safer and less irritating than cigarette smoking.^{2, 12, 14} *The American Journal of Public Health* recently published findings from the California Tobacco Study that showed a 40 percent increase in hookah smoking among California adults between 2005 and 2008, much of this use in young, college educated adults.¹⁷ Surveys of youth and young adults reveal that this population believes they will experience fewer health effects from hookah smoking than from cigarette smoking.^{2, 12} In a survey of attitudes among hookah smokers in Richmond and Memphis the majority of smokers believed that their risk of addiction is less, and reported that they could quit at any time.² Most reported that if they switched from cigarettes to hookahs it would reduce their health risks from tobacco.² Researchers also report that hookah smoke may be less irritating to smokers, presumably because the smoke is filtered through water before inhalation occurs.⁷

Regulatory environment is murky and varies from state to state.

Despite widespread adoption of smokefree workplace legislation in many states and localities, tobacco stores and hookah bars continue to operate. They are often exempted from the requirements that prohibit smoking in public places because they sell tobacco and are classified primarily as tobacco retail establishments. The retail exemption has sometimes been interpreted to mean that patrons can sample the tobacco products they purchase on site.¹⁸ Some establishments qualify for exemptions because they do not serve alcohol on the premises.¹⁸ The definition of smoking can also be an impediment to effective regulation and enforcement, because water pipe smoking is not consistently defined as smoking across jurisdictions.^{18, 20}

With the exception of menthol cigarettes, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) prohibits the sale of cigarettes with “characterizing flavors” but does not regulate other flavored tobacco products such as those used in waterpipes. The FDA is currently examining options for regulating these products, which, according to a fact sheet posted on FDA’s website, the agency considers unsafe and harmful.¹⁹

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A broad range of strategies are needed to reverse the accelerating trend of hookah use in the United States. To accomplish this objective, the American Lung Association recommends the following:

- 1 Close loopholes in state and local laws that exempt hookah bars.** States with smokefree workplace laws often include specific exemptions that enable hookah establishments to continue to allow smoking. In some states and local jurisdictions, hookah bars can qualify as tobacco retail stores, tobacco/cigar bars, private clubs, or owner-operated businesses. Exemptions for hookah bars should be closed in existing laws when possible and not included in new smokefree workplace laws.
- 2 Close loopholes in laws/regulations by clearly defining smoking to include waterpipes.** State laws should clearly include waterpipes in their definitions of smoking. This loophole has been used to exempt hookah bars from laws prohibiting smoking in public places and workplaces in some states.
- 3 FDA should assert authority over tobacco used in hookahs.** The U.S. Food and Drug Administration should assert authority over the manufacturing and marketing of tobacco used in waterpipes, and apply regulations to these products as needed to protect public health.
- 4 Prohibit flavorings in hookah tobacco.** Federal, state or local laws/regulations should be used to eliminate flavorings in hookah tobacco. Flavorings are one of the factors associated with increasing use in youth and young adults. Prohibiting flavors is likely to lessen the appeal of hookah smoking.
- 5 Include questions in national surveys to provide data on hookah use to the public health community.** National surveys such as the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) should include questions about hookah smoking so that better estimates of national incidence and prevalence will be available for policymakers and public health professionals.
- 6 Implement and enforce laws prohibiting the sale of hookah tobacco and its smoking paraphernalia to minors.** The varying definitions of smoking in some jurisdictions allow minors to be admitted to establishments where hookahs are used and/or where paraphernalia is sold. Closing these loopholes will help prevent minors from purchasing hookah tobacco or its paraphernalia.
- 7 Use licensure requirements or zoning rules to regulate hookah establishments.** License and zoning requirements for the sale of tobacco, alcohol or food, hours of operation, age of patrons, and live music or belly dancing can be tools to restrict hookahs bars and lounges. Some jurisdictions prohibit tobacco use and the sale of food and alcohol on the premises. Zoning regulations could prohibit hookah bars and lounges near college campuses.

In addition to the policy recommendations outlined above, alternate measures to discourage hookah use should also be considered. Prohibiting advertising in college newspapers or websites can help to discourage college students from frequenting hookah establishments. Additionally, public awareness campaigns that highlight the health effects of hookahs and counter the myths about reduced harm (compared to cigarette smoking) could help build public support for more effective regulations.

Conclusions A comprehensive approach to limiting access to hookah use is critical to averting a potentially deadly trend. Hookah smoking is a growing public health threat that may lead to a resurgence in tobacco use among vulnerable populations. Both the American Lung Association and the World Health Organization recommend that laws or regulations prohibiting cigarette or other tobacco use in public places apply to hookah smoking.¹⁸ Efforts should be made to restrict hookah use, especially among teens and young adults.