

How Unhealthy Is Hookah?

By Angela Haupt July 23, 2014 | 10:25 a.m. EDT

Spend an hour smoking hookah, and you might as well have smoked a pack of cigarettes. That's how much tar and nicotine you'll be exposed to.

"If you examine the stuff they're inhaling, it's potent – it's a lot of bad stuff," says Norman H. Edelman, senior medical adviser for the American Lung Association. "Many teens believe this is safe, and of course, we know it's not safe."

On the surface, hookah – with flavors ranging from cherry to chocolate, and watermelon to mint – tastes more like fun than a serious health risk. Perhaps that's why, as cigarette use declines among young people, hookah smoking is gaining popularity. One in 5 high school seniors in the United States has smoked hookah sometime in the past year, according to a study published in Pediatrics this month. And another new study, published in Nursing Research, found that the majority of young adults 18 to 30 who smoke hookah think it's safe – a false assumption.

Hookah, a type of water pipe that originated in the Middle East and India, facilitates charcoal-heated air through a tobacco mixture, then through a water-filled chamber and finally through a pipe that allows users to inhale the vapor. It's typically smoked in groups –

hookah bars and cafes are a mainstay in many cities – with the same mouthpiece passed from person to person. It doesn't taste or smell like cigarette smoke, but the common notion that the water used in a water pipe filters out harmful ingredients is false, research suggests.

The new Pediatrics study sheds light on who is most likely to smoke hookah – or shisha, as it's often called. Among the 5,540 students surveyed nationwide, the most frequent users were from families of higher socioeconomic status, white, male, already cigarette smokers and had previously used alcohol, marijuana or other illicit substances. Living in a big city, having more highly educated parents and a weekly income of \$50 or more also increased the odds of hookah use. Joseph Palamar , the study's lead author and an assistant professor of population health at New York University, says it's unclear why these teens are most likely to gravitate toward hookah use.

"It might have to do with the stigma," he says. "Cigarette smoking is a highly stigmatized behavior these days – but hookah doesn't appear to have that stigma, so use generally isn't frowned upon. In fact, it's trendy, a lot of people are talking about it and it's a social activity. People don't view it as an unhealthy behavior."

Sarah Din , 31, echoes that sentiment – aside from the “fruity and flowery” flavors, hookah is distinct because of the way it brings people together, she says. She's the founder of a hookah Meetup group in San Francisco, and her interest traces back to the years she spent in the Middle East as a high school student. “In those countries, going to smoke hookah is like going to Starbucks,” she recalls. “People just gather, sit around and play games like backgammon or cards. There's a hookah cafe on every corner, and they're open really late – some until 5 a.m. It's the ultimate pastime since people don't drink alcohol for religious reasons and don't go to bars.”

Still, experts are quick to point out that while hookah is often mistakenly perceived as safer and less addictive than cigarettes, it can lead to short- and long-term health risks. For one thing, it appears to deliver more tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide than

cigarettes. Consider that during an hourlong hookah session, it's possible to inhale as much smoke as a cigarette smoker would consuming 100 or more cigarettes, according to a 2005 report from the World Health Organization. And in May, researchers found that just one evening of hookah smoking could make nicotine urine levels spike by more than 70 times. Findings were published in the journal Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention. In other words, don't be fooled if tobacco contains fruit – it's still tobacco, unhealthy and addicting.

Those who need more convincing might consider research that suggests hookah is linked with lung and bladder cancer, respiratory disease, heart disease and adverse effects during pregnancy like low birth weight. Not to mention, its tobacco juices irritate the mouth and spike the risk of developing oral cancers. Even bystanders, perhaps hanging out in hookah lounges as their friends indulge, aren't immune. Secondhand smoke risks from hookah appear to be the same as from cigarettes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Despite such concerns, Din says the health effects don't worry her. "People do a lot of other things that are way unhealthier, like eating habits and not working out," she says. "So if I'm doing it once a week for an hour, it's like drinking alcohol – you know it's toxic for your body, but you're not an alcoholic. It really depends on how you control it yourself."

Palamar, too, likens occasional hookah use to moderate drinking. "No matter what, there's going to be people who get drunk once in a while," he says. "If you're [smoking hookah] occasionally, it's not as bad as doing it every day. We don't want people to use at all, but if you're going to, at least keep it infrequent."

And it's interesting, he continues, to note how hookah compares to teen marijuana use. About 1 in 3 high school seniors have used marijuana in the last year, and 45 percent have tried it at some other point, Palamar says. "It's still nowhere near the rates of marijuana," he says. "But I worry more about hookah – because as we all know,

many of us have tried marijuana, and then you move on. This actually has nicotine, it's socially accepted and if you start doing it more and more, it could really be classically addicting."

<http://health.usnews.com/health-news/health-wellness/articles/2014/07/23/how-unhealthy-is-hookah>