

## Hookah rooms catching on in suburbs

Hookah lounges are common sites around college campuses these days and in urban areas. They're making their debut in the suburban area, too. XO Underground in Morris is so popular the owner is looking to expand. There's one in Naperville, too, and another in a Crest Hill strip mall. Although the draw seems to be a social one, researchers have a big message to those who choose to smoke from hookahs: beware. Hookah smoke may not be as harmless as you might think.

A hookah is an elaborate-looking water pipe device used all over the world for smoking tobacco and other herbs. Molasses or fruit flavors are often added. The shisha, or tobacco, is placed in a small pot in the top of the hookah, lit by charcoal, and the smoke is drawn through a water reservoir in the bottom of the hookah before it's inhaled through one or several tubes leading out of the device. It's been used for centuries in the Middle East and has been gaining popularity all over the world, especially in Europe and now the United States. It's estimated that around 100 million people worldwide use a hookah daily. It's a social custom in many parts of the world, and its participants gather in hookah coffee houses daily to visit, catch up on the news, and relax, much like Brits do in pubs. But when researchers tested the smoke that issues from the average hookah, they found some bad news.

Hookah smoke, the World Health Organization says, contains numerous toxicants known to cause lung cancer, heart disease and other diseases. The group issued an alert in May, warning of the health risks posed by water pipes, saying their risks are the same as with cigarettes. The British Medical Journal said that hookah smoking carries a greater risk of carbon monoxide poisoning than cigarettes, and the Journal of Periodontology published a study reporting that hookah is more detrimental to dental health than cigarette smoking. The tobacco used for water pipe smoking, it said, contains 2 to 4 percent nicotine, as compared to 1 to 3 percent for cigarettes. Provena Saint Joseph Medical Center pulmonologist Dr. John Walsh said new results suggest smoking from a hookah might be worse than even smoking cigarettes. "In a typical one-hour hookah smoking session," Walsh said, "you get 100 to 200 times the volume of smoke than you get from smoking one cigarette. You are exposed to multiple levels of several toxic compounds. And if charcoal is used, you can also be exposed to potentially huge volumes of heavy metals. "In a time when we are really clamping down on cigarette smoking, this is a step backward.

Gayle Sauer would disagree. The owner of XO Underground in Morris -- a hookah lounge -- says hookah establishments are a step up for young adults from hanging out in bars. There's not much out there for young people in their 20s and 30s except bars, she said, and nobody hanging out at a hookah lounge drives home drunk. "Hookah smoking is a 4,000-year-old tradition," Sauer said. "We use a natural herbal mix with molasses and sugar and flavorings. It's nothing hallucinogenic and nothing alcoholic. It's mostly a social thing, where they come in and meet their friends and relax and watch movies or music videos. "It's the coffee house of the millennium." Sauer said she thinks smoking hookah is not like cigarettes. Her customers might smoke hookah once a week, or so. "It's not like people are smoking this 24/7," she said. "They come in here now and then, and it's more of a social thing for them." Sauer said her hookah lounge also brings in bands, has poetry readings, improv, stand-up comedy, and film fests.

Dr. Walsh, though, says smoking hookah even one night a week is not acceptable in his book. One study, he said, showed the carbon monoxide levels in hookah smokers' blood averaged 10.06, whereas the concentration in those smoking regular cigarettes was 6.47. Carbon monoxide is not good for adults, he said, but can really harm fetuses. It reduces the oxygen that reaches the baby, he said, which in turn, can cause all sorts of effects, such as respiratory problems and low birth weight. One hookah-smoking session, he said, is equivalent to smoking a pack of cigarettes. When asked if he thought smoking hookah only one time a week was acceptable, Walsh said no. "If you want to take high levels of cancer-causing chemicals in your body once a week..." He answered. "I don't think it's safe at any level. In the end, there's no acceptable level of cancer-causing chemicals that we should be inhaling. This is not a harmless activity by any means.

## About the Author

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