

Hookah/Sheesha Water Pipes Smoking: Why it Should be Completely Prohibited?

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Use of Sheesha Water Pipes/Hookahs began centuries ago in India and Persia. Sheesha/Hookah bars are now getting popular especially with young people around the world, including the US, Britain, France, Russia and the Middle East. Sheesha water pipes are used to smoke tobacco mixed with a wide variety of flavours e.g. watermelon, cappuccino, apple, mint, cherry, chocolate etc. Charcoal-heated air is passed through the tobacco mixture and ultimately through a water-filled container. The user inhales the smoke through a tube and mouthpiece. It is thought to be less harmful than smoking cigarettes, but they are not a safe alternative. The studies show that the smoke contains many of the harmful contents found in cigarette smoke, such as nicotine, heavy metals and tar etc. About 82 toxic chemicals and carcinogens have been identified in hookah smoke [1-3]. The heated charcoal poses additional health risks since it produces carbon monoxide and other carcinogenic chemicals [4].

Hookah use is increasing world over especially among school children and college students. The Global Youth Tobacco Survey GYTS reported that the prevalence of hookah use among children aged 13 - 15 years varied from 6% to 34% in 34 surveyed countries.

A study conducted in the USA reported that the prevalence of current hookah smokers among university student was 8.4%. Of all current hookah smokers, 51.4% reported no current cigarette use. In a survey conducted across 28 countries of the European Union, 16% of respondent reported that they had tried a hookah at least once. In the South Asian region, the prevalence of hookah use among men was highest in Bangladesh (1.3%), the prevalence of hookah use among women was highest in India (0.6%) [5].

Hookah bars are marketed as a happening place to youngsters though serving deadly products. They also serve alcohol, food and also offer live music etc. Many types of flavours such as watermelon, tropical fruit, orange cream, caramel, chocolate, tutti frutti etc. are added to attract youngsters. A survey was done in 2013 - 2014, 79% of youth aged 12 - 17 smoked hookah because of flavors [6]. An hour-long hookah session may involve 100 to 200 puffs [7] against a cigarette which requires 8 to 10 puffs, so the exposure is for a prolonged period. In a typical hookah smoking session, smokers are exposed to nine times more carbon monoxide exposure as a single cigarette and get up to 1.7 times the nicotine exposure [8].

In a one hour session, a waterpipe user inhales as much smoke as a cigarette user would by puffing through 100 or more cigarettes [9].

As per a study by the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, one hookah session delivers 25 times the tar of a single cigarette [10].

Hookah users typically spend 45 minutes to an hour socializing; they take longer pulls that are held for a longer duration, all of which leads to increased exposure to the carcinogenic smoke.

It is a myth that Hookah Smoking is less harmful than cigarette smoking. Hookah second-hand smoke poses the same dangers as smoke from cigarettes [11]. Allowing these types of businesses to circumvent our smoke-free laws is a real setback to public health.

Why it is important to strictly implement provisions in the law to prohibit mushrooming of Hookah bars?

Hookah smoking can be even more deleterious to health than cigarettes smoking [12-14].

Short-term hookah use can lead to increased heart rate and blood pressure, difficulty in breathing, and carbon monoxide intoxication. There is evidence that waterpipe tobacco or hookah smoking may present a risk for Cardio Vascular effects. Nicotine is a highly addictive chemical, that can have damaging effects on adolescent brain development and is even harmful to developing fetus, which weighs less than non-smoker pregnant ladies.

A study suggests that use of Hookahs for a prolonged period causes chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [15].

How Hookah Bars menace is being tackled in India?

Running a Hookah Bar invites penal provisions under the following Indian Laws:

- Poison Act, 1919 and Punjab Poisons Possession and Sales Rules, 2014, as Nicotine has been declared as a poison in many Indian states [16].
- Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003 [COTPA, 2003] [17]. Hookah bars violate all the main four sections of COTPA including the prohibition of smoking in public places.
- Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 [18]. Flavoured or scented tobacco used in Hookahs is prohibited
- Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940 [19]. Nicotine sale is legal only as Nicotine Gums, lozenges and patches
- Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 [20]. It is illegal to offer any intoxicating product to minors.
- Section 268,269 and 270 of IPC,1860 [21]. Running a Hookah Bar is a Public nuisance, Negligent act likely to spread infection of disease dangerous to life and Malignant act likely to spread infection of disease dangerous to life.
- COTPA amendment Punjab banning hukkah bar dated 18.9.18 [22]. It has also been banned in states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. COTPA has been amended to impose a permanent ban on hookah bars in three states of India. The move is aimed at checking the trend of hookah, hookah bars, and the use of tobacco in various forms among youngsters.

What is required to be done by Governments world over to deal with the menace of Hookah smoking?

The governments must frame policies to deal with all the existing gaps in the present laws to protect youth from the harm caused due to unregulated sale and consumption of hookah. Tobacco Industry has been using tactics since decades to mislead policy-makers in delaying the implementation of effective tobacco control measures world over. To be effective, any policy to prohibit Hookahs must be based on sound scientific research and should follow the process of documentation, analysis and prescription.

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