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# Stephen Krewson | Clearing the smoke around hookah

**As a recent study discovers, college students may be greatly underestimating the risks of hookah smoking**

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*The Me Speech Zone*



Awareness. It's being raised all around you, all the time, and seldom with your consent. Studies have shown that even simple acts such as waking up in the morning or walking down Locust may increase your awareness to near-toxic levels.

So it's with a sincere apology that I attempt to raise awareness about everyone's favorite substance that is processed using a combination of heat and water and is subsequently smoked. I speak, of course, about crack - ahem, hookah.

Recent research on the water-pipe smoking habits of college students suggests that it might be smart to update preconceived ideas about hookah. The Journal of Adolescent Health editorialized earlier this year that, "Substantial misinformation about [hookah] smoke being 'cleaner' or 'natural' is passed along, without any mention of the fact that nicotine adsorbed this way is just as addictive. Hookah and water-pipe users are thus at risk because the nicotine exposure is reinforced by pro-social activity."

As a casual hookah smoker, I needed to better understand this apocalyptic prognosis. I spoke with Brian Primack of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, lead author of a just-released study analyzing hookah usage among college students.

Primack was far less dogmatic on the risks associated with hookah: "We really don't know 100 percent. The uncertainty is part of the concern." The lack of a clear, scientific consensus seems to factor into the behavior of occasional hookah smokers, such as College junior Sarah Akkina.

I asked what it would take for her to quit hookah altogether: "It's all about moderation for me. If [hookah] posed a serious risk - which I doubt it does - I would have to stop. Also, if they correlate it with addictive behavior, then I would stop."

That last point about addiction seems to be the crux of the issue. I asked Dr. Primack whether or not hookah is addictive: "Excellent question. We need to do more research on that. The answer will be yes and no ... It's

not going to affect everybody the same way, but it's almost certain to increase the risk [of nicotine addiction] for all of them."

As he vividly put it, "Studies have shown that the nicotine from just four cigarettes changes the brain ... One hookah session is equal to 10 cigarettes in terms of nicotine. What does that imply?"

Other students were aware of the medical evidence but disputed the level of risk involved. College junior Jeff Boruszak, who hosts a weekly hookah gathering on the green, said he understood that smoking hookah carries the same risk as smoking any other tobacco.

"I'd assume that the vast majority of people believe the same thing," he told me. "I mean, honestly, you're breathing SMOKE. Any nincompoop should understand that. That said, I believe that there is an enormous misunderstanding of the health risks that come from smoking."

Just how much hookah smoking does to elevate these health risks remains a topic for further research. It's clear, though, that the large segment of students who smoke hookah but not cigarettes faces an information deficit. Given Primack's finding that 35 percent of the hookah smokers studied had never touched a cigarette, some sort of educational intervention is imperative - though surely difficult.

"Truth campaigns would be really hard with hookah," noted Primack. "Aesthetically, it's a really beautiful, pleasing process. You have this gorgeous bronze contraption - often with inlaid marble."

Marble and bronze aside, all parties agreed on the wondrous social atmosphere facilitated by hookah. I'll spare you the rhapsodic details, but the general opinion might be formulated by the equation: hookah = the illest.

Boruszak performed a succinct cost-benefit analysis: while hookah "contains nicotine, and can be addictive, chances are the person who smokes [it] once a month isn't going to be jonesing anytime soon. As far as quitting goes, I'm already a smoker, and I love the atmosphere of a hookah gathering, so I'm not going to quit in the near future."

For the less resolute among us, it might be wise to crack open a copy of a medical journal before lifting that hose to your lips.

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