

# Hitting the hookah: Will the trend rage on, despite recent health warnings?

[college.usatoday.com/2014/06/05/hitting-the-hookah-will-the-trend-rage-on-despite-recent-health-warnings/](http://college.usatoday.com/2014/06/05/hitting-the-hookah-will-the-trend-rage-on-despite-recent-health-warnings/)

The World Health Organization (WHO) [determined in a 2005 study that a hookah smoking session](#), which typically lasts 20 to 80 minutes and may include 50 to 200 inhalations of shisha, is the equivalent of inhaling the smoke of 100 cigarettes.

(AP File Photo)

Despite this information, many students are still opting to unwind at a relaxed hookah bar on a Friday night instead of a rowdy, crowded college bar.

“From what I’ve heard, it’s not as bad as normal smoking because you don’t inhale (tobacco directly), as opposed to cigarettes. I was personally against smoking cigarettes and weed, but hookah is a huge trend right now and I wanted to get in the loop and give it a try,” says Stephanie Dascher, a sophomore criminal justice major at the Community College of Philadelphia.

Dascher operates under the same assumption that many college students — especially those who haven’t heard of WHO’s study — do: Hookah, an instrument used for vaporizing flavored tobacco through a water basin, is a less harmful alternative to smoking other tobacco products.

For many college students, hookah bars are simply places to socialize. In 2011, [Science Daily reported](#) that 40.3% of students — more than 1/3 of the participants surveyed at eight North Carolina universities — had smoked hookah at least once. Surprisingly, 22% of the respondents that admitted to smoking hookah shared that they had never tried a cigarette, suggesting that hookah is more appealing in a group setting.

Since then, lounges near college campuses have done their part to market this idea.

Odyssey Hookah Lounge, a 10-minute walk from Cypress College in Cypress, Calif., [advertises “College Nights”](#) with fruit head specials and music performances. The Kabash Hookah Bar, located on the University of Texas’ campus, attracts their college customers with [photos of students](#) enjoying the hookah atmosphere. Mangos Café, situated in the heart of Ohio State University, uses [OSU-related hashtags](#) to draw in their regular college crowd.

Alban Xhema, a senior archaeology major at Pennsylvania State University, experimented with hookah for the first time at age 15 and recently ditched the habit due to the headaches it caused him. He sums up the craze by saying, “It was just a social thing. The flavors make it cool and attractive, and it’s like, ‘Well, I’m not drinking, I’m not really doing anything bad.’”

Recent studies done on hookah, however, show that this statement could not be further from the truth.

On May 16, the *American Association for Cancer Research Journal* [published a study](#) in which researchers examined urine samples of 55 regular hookah users. The study concluded that smoking hookah “is associated with significant nicotine intake and carcinogen exposure,” putting the college students who visit bars and lounges at risk of cancer and chronic illnesses.

After smoking, the 55 users had a 73-fold increase in nicotine, a fourfold increase in [cotinine](#) (a product formed after nicotine enters the body), a twofold increase in [NNAL](#) (a chemical product that contributes to

carcinogens in tobacco products), and 14% to 91% increase in VOC—“volatile organic compounds”—mercapturic acid metabolites immediately following water pipe smoking.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s [fact sheet on hookah](#) further explains that hookah users inhale roughly 90,000 milliliters of smoke during a session, while cigarette users inhale 500 to 600 milliliters of smoke per cigarette.

According to the CDC, side effects of shisha inhalation include oral cancer, lung cancer, stomach cancer, cancer of the esophagus, reduced lung function and decreased fertility.

Other risks include [exposure to carbon monoxide](#) and other hazardous chemicals, as well as highly infectious diseases such as the flu, herpes and tuberculosis.

While these new studies expand on WHO’s research from 2005, they seem to be garnering more attention from [media outlets](#) and current and [former users](#). Four years after WHO released its findings, a study published in *PubMed Central* reported that 58.3% of the 235 hookah users examined still believed that hookah was less harmful than cigarette smoking.

Emily Gumper, a junior psychology major at Temple University in Philadelphia, was under the impression that hookah was risk-free before she started smoking shisha regularly.

“All I was told, which I know now is false, is that hookah is not addicting and is simply evaporated water with flavored tobacco,” Gumper says. “I always thought, ‘Well, this is better than cigarettes or weed because I won’t get addicted and it doesn’t impair me.’”

Though most students still assume that hookah filters out the addictive properties of tobacco, Gumper’s understanding of shisha is more accurate: WHO’s study of waterpipe smoking also proved that, though the water basin does filter out some of the nicotine, regular users are still exposed to the substance.

However, one of the most “addictive” qualities of hookah is the romantic, laidback lifestyle it seemingly goes hand-in-hand with.

Dascher, who recently visited a hookah bar for the first time, says, “Going to the bar gives teens who aren’t 21 yet that chance to socialize just like you would if you were in a bar drinking. I know there are health risks when it comes to hookah, but I don’t focus on them as much as I should. I just look at it as a fun, socializing hobby.”

This year, the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine [conducted research](#) that determined the “relaxing, pleasurable, fun and sexual” image of hookah is what drives college students to bars and lounges, regardless of the health risks.

Pitt’s researchers recommend that, instead of telling students what they may already know about tobacco, colleges should be working to break down the romantic allure of hookah.

Jaime Sidani, senior research specialist in the Program for Research on Media and Health (PROMH) at Pitt, told the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, “Hookah tobacco smoking does not seem to be hampered by many of the negative social stigmas of cigarette smoking. If educational programs can help students to cut through the positive portrayals and marketing of hookah smoking, it may be possible to make hookah smoking less attractive and socially acceptable, resulting in less initiation.”

Because Pitt’s study was made available online just in December, most colleges have yet to implement programs that combat the image of hookah. For now, however, the study does ask the question: will these medical studies be enough to sway students, or will the hookah trend rage on?

