

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

Hookah Smoking: A Growing Public Health Issue

What is a waterpipe? A waterpipe, also known as a hookah, is a long-necked device used to smoke tobacco. The tobacco is indirectly heated in a bowl, often using a quick-lighting charcoal, and the smoke is filtered through water.

What are other names for a waterpipe? Hookah, hubble bubble, nargile, argileh, shisha, boory, and goza (and various spellings of these terms) are all names for a waterpipe.

What type of tobacco is smoked in a waterpipe? The most common waterpipe tobacco in the United States is maassel (also spelled mu'essel, mu'assel; sometimes referred to as shisha), a tobacco sweetened with honey or molasses that is available in a variety of flavors, including apple, banana, strawberry, chocolate, mint, coffee, rose, and vanilla. Tobacco-free herbal maassel is also available. One bowl of maassel will typically last 30-45 minutes when smoked in a waterpipe.

Where can you buy a waterpipe or maassel? Waterpipes and maassel are widely available for purchase on the internet and in certain retail establishments, such as hookah lounges and Middle Eastern markets. The same age restrictions that apply to purchasing other tobacco products (18 or older in most states) also apply to purchasing waterpipes and maassel. Online prices for packaged maassel range from \$7 to \$20 for 250g, which will fill approximately 20-30 bowls. Maassel is also sold in single-serve packages ("shots"), often for less than \$1 each.

Who uses waterpipes? Waterpipe users are primarily young adults between the ages of 18 and 25, particularly college students. Surveys estimate that between 15% and 20% of college freshmen have used waterpipes in the past month.

Where are waterpipes used? Waterpipes are generally used in a group setting, either in a private residence or a public hookah lounge (also called hookah bars or cafes). Hookah lounges are an increasingly popular alternative to bars and clubs, as they may be open later hours (e.g., until 4:00 a.m.) and are open to those who are under 21. Most hookah lounges require customers be of legal adult age, but some establishments that sell herbal maassel may have a lower minimum age. Several online hookah bar directories are available (e.g., www.hookah-bars.com, www.hookahculture.com), and an informal review found that the cost for the use of a hookah and a bowl of maassel at hookah bars range from \$5 to \$20.

What are the perceptions of the harm of waterpipe use? The majority of waterpipe smokers believe that waterpipe smoking is less harmful than cigarette smoking. For example, most beginning waterpipe smokers (90%) believe cigarette smoking is more addictive than waterpipe smoking. Another survey found that 83% of waterpipe users believed a cigarette smoker who switched to waterpipe use would experience a reduction in health risks. These findings are of concern, since perceptions of low risk are often related to higher prevalence of use.

What are the health effects? The next issue of the *CESAR FAX* will review current research on the health effects of waterpipe use, including misconceptions that may contribute to the growing popularity of hookah smoking.

SOURCES: A list of sources is available on the online version of this issue (www.cesar.umd.edu/cesar/cesarfax/vol17/17-22.pdf).

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