

Hookah, line and stinker

Shisha bars are gaining popularity in Hong Kong, but are smokers of the aromatic tobacco playing with fire?

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Mahesh Daryanani first tried a hookah when his friend took him to a shisha bar 10 years ago. He fell in love instantly with the blend of tobacco, fruit and molasses. "It's relaxing and calms me down," the Hong Kong-born Indian says.

A former cigarette smoker, Daryanani, who owns a travel agency, prefers smoking shisha because it doesn't give that "sick and dry" feeling got from smoking cigarettes. "There's no similar yucky feeling even if I smoke shisha for two hours. It's like breathing flavoured air. You feel light-headed for a few seconds [after a puff]. If the shisha is made right, you can't feel tobacco."

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He goes to Ra Restaurant & Lounge in Tsim Sha Tsui every day after work to smoke shisha and unwind. One serving, which can last up to two hours for a solitary smoker, costs HK\$150 there.

Daryanani is among a growing number of Hongkongers taking to smoking water pipes a trend that is worrying doctors who say that smoking shisha, contrary to what many enthusiasts think, could be just as harmful as cigarettes.

A Department of Health spokesman says they have long advised against water-pipe smoking since it causes the same kind of diseases as cigarettes. These include oral, lung, stomach and oesophageal cancers, reduced lung function, heart disease and decreased fertility. Ornate metal-and-glass water pipes, or hookah, are used for smoking shisha. Available in a wide variety of flavours, from mint and strawberry to guava, the tobacco is covered with foil and roasted with charcoal that burns to about 450 degrees Celsius nearly half the temperature of cigarette smoke. The vapour then passes through a water chamber and is inhaled slowly and deeply.

Enthusiasts say shisha feels smooth and lacks the piquancy of cigarette puffing.

Dr Roland Leung Chung-chuen, a specialist in respiratory medicine, says it is a misguided belief that water filtration can cleanse shisha of all its toxins.

"There are toxins like tar in shisha that are insoluble in water," he says. "There are more than 3,000 chemicals in tobacco that are well documented. We don't know how many of them are water-soluble. The efficiency of filtration by water is in doubt."

Dr Tony Mok Shu-kam, lung cancer expert and professor at Chinese University's clinical oncology department, says most of the carcinogens found in tobacco come from the water-insoluble hydrocarbon family. that is insoluble in water.

Although the Department of Health's Tobacco Control Office says it has not conducted a study on pastime in Hong Kong hookah use in the city, shisha suppliers and bar owners say they have seen a large increase in the number of customers.



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Shisha bars are a hit among locals and expats.

Photos: Jonathan Wong

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Brian Lalji, owner of Ra, says his shisha bar is so crowded that the staff sometimes have to turn people away. "Customers were mostly expatriates before. Recently, more and more locals come. Six years ago, there were just two to three shisha bars. Now there are more than 25 bars serving it."

His brother, Nav, 24, used all his savings and borrowed some of his mother's money to start Hookah Hutt a year and a half ago, selling shisha sourced from India, China and Egypt. Nav, the only shisha supplier in Hong Kong, says his business turnover has doubled over the past year. "It was just a small store [when I started] and I sought customers through Facebook. There were just five customers per month," the Hong Kong-born Indian says. "Now I have five customers a day and I am planning to open another store." While the origins of shisha are disputed (some say it originated in India; others Persia or Turkey), it has gained immense popularity since the 16th century, spreading from the Middle East to the United States, Canada, Britain and elsewhere. In the US alone, there are more than 300 hookah bars, many located near universities and malls.

Nav, who has been smoking shisha since he was 18, says it is a "great social lubricant" that helps him make new friends. A communal shisha session where smokers with individual plastic mouthpieces pass around the hookah can last up to two hours. "It's like drinking alcohol. I only do it socially," says Nav, who smokes three times a week. "People went for coffee with friends before; now they go for shisha."

And it seems shisha even goes well with food. Dody Adel Wakim, a co-owner of Egyptian restaurant Sahara in SoHo, which serves shisha alongside a wide array of Middle Eastern dishes, says his restaurant has drawn more local clientele. "People love it so much; [they] like to order food, drinks and shisha as an addition," he says.

A World Health Organisation (WHO) report in 2005 on shisha smoking found that an hour-long shisha session involves inhaling 100 to 200 times the volume of smoke inhaled when smoking a cigarette. It also found that water filters out less than 5 per cent of the nicotine.

The way shisha is smoked where Shisha users draw deep breaths for a much longer duration than with cigarettes, Leung says, and this poses a lot of harm. "A chain smoker of cigarettes throws a cigarette away after puffing on it a few times. But shisha smokers do it for a long session. They are exposed to a lot of second-hand smoke. The total amount of smoke inhaled is also much larger."

According to a 2005 study by Dr Kamlesh Asotra, the biomedical science research administrator for the University of California Tobacco-Related Disease Research Programme, at the University of California Office of the President the burning charcoal creating the hookah smoke produces 143 grams of carbon monoxide per one gram of shisha 11 times the amount found in a gram of cigarette tobacco and equal to a single cigarette.

Hookah tobacco also contains significantly higher quantities of toxic heavy metals such as arsenic, nickel and lead compared to cigarettes.

"In a single hookah smoking session using 20 grams of hookah tobacco, the hookah smoker is exposed to several-fold greater quantities of the addictive stimulant nicotine for up to 45 to 60 minutes. This is equivalent to chain-smoking 15 cigarettes," Asotra wrote in the August 2005 issue of the Tobacco-Related Disease Research Programme Newsletter.

"Hookah smokers are exposed to three-fold greater amounts of carbon monoxide than cigarette smokers. One of the reasons for the greater carbon monoxide concentrations in hookah smoke is the charcoal that is added to enhance the burning of the moist tobacco concoction," he wrote.

For all the health warnings associated with the habit, scientific research on shisha smoking is scant compared to cigarette smoking.

There are also conflicting studies. Dr Kamal Chaouachi, a tobacco expert who teaches at Paris-Dauphine University and has researched shisha for 15 years, told The Guardian in a report in August that it was "ludicrous and unscientific" for the WHO to claim that shisha smoke was 200 times more toxic than cigarette smoke.

He added that Royal University of Saudi Arabia researchers found that shisha smoke was 20 times less concentrated in chemicals than cigarette smoke.

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"While about 5,000 chemicals have been identified so far in cigarette smoke, chemists and pharmacologists from Saudi Arabia only found 142 chemicals in shisha," Chaouachi says. "A medical team in Pakistan found that shisha smoke can be much less carcinogenic and radioactive than cigarette smoke."

Mok says there are too few scientific studies that compare water-pipe and cigarette smoking to reach a definitive conclusion.

"Most of the talk about water-pipe smoking is just hot air. There are no comparison studies on how smoking patterns affect health. We don't know whether a continuous long session of shisha smoking is better or worse than lighting up throughout the day," Mok says.

"On the list of countries [where there are the most lung cancer cases], the Middle East, which has the highest number of shisha smokers, is ranked only six or seven, far lower ranked than America and Europe," the expert adds.

For all the contradictions in scientific findings, Daryanani says he is not worried. "Everything can kill you. If you are supposed to die, you die. If you are not, no matter what you do, you won't die."

Nav, the supplier, says more customers are turning to a tobacco-free version of shisha called herbal shisha. "Around 20 per cent of my clientele have bought it. The tobacco leaves are replaced by tea or other leaves. The smoke might not feel as thick or flavourful, but it's a healthier and safer alternative."

And the smoker believes he will be fine as long as he exercises restraint: "Everything good or bad should be taken in moderation."

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