

Is hookah smoking safer than cigarettes?

The Polk County Health Department would like to educate the public about the dangers of hookah smoking. Many people are unfamiliar with this growing trend so we could be missing an opportunity to discuss this choice with young people. (See Ledger article, December 5th, 2009 “Hookah Bar...”)

Hookahs, also called waterpipes, are an ancient form of tobacco use that originated in Persia and India. The hookah heats specially-made tobacco, and then passes the smoke through a bowl of water. The smoker then draws his tobacco smoke through a rubber hose to a mouthpiece.

Contrary to popular belief, hookah smoking is not a safe alternative to cigarette smoking. The tobacco is no less toxic. The truth is, in as little as 45 minutes of hookah smoking, a person can be exposed to as much nicotine and tar as in one pack of cigarettes, according to the Bacchus Network. This can also lead to increased cigarette and other tobacco use.

According to a World Health Organization advisory, a typical one-hour session of hookah smoking exposes the user to 100 to 200 times the volume of smoke inhaled from a single cigarette. It is concerning if the users are not aware of these facts.

Hookah smoking can lead to respiratory disease, heart disease, and various types of cancer. Sharing the mouthpiece with others may also spread contagious diseases, according to the Tobacco Public Policy Center.

Hookah bars are increasingly found near college campuses and where they are targeting a young adult market. Hookah smoking may cause young adults to develop a nicotine addiction which can lead to habitual cigarette smoking and severe health consequences.

Increasing tobacco use during a time when many are moving away from this habit seems contradictory. This is a particular danger in light of the fact that the health risks of hookah smoking are largely unknown or underappreciated by young adults.

To protect the public from the potential dangers of the growing waterpipe trend, community leaders should work together to correct the current misperceptions about the health risks of hookah smoking.

Tobacco use is a choice. But for anyone deciding to experiment with this new fad, the best place to start is with awareness of the pros and cons. Get the facts for yourself from sources you trust.