

Q & A Mindline



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Q Is hookah smoking less addictive and safer than smoking cigarettes? And would you recommend e-Cigarettes as a safer alternative to both hookah and cigarettes?

I am glad you asked this question! Unfortunately, the question is not about quitting this deadly habit, instead is about switching to another one. Misconceptions are leading many to take up hookah or e-cigarettes without considering plans to quit tobacco.

Nicotine in tobacco is highly addictive and it causes unpleasant withdrawal symptoms when a person tries to quit. Therefore, a tobacco addict may scamper from one to another form of nicotine delivery system to replenish supplies despite feeling otherwise. Choosing (perceived) lesser of the evils is not sensible unless there is informed and considered plans to overcome the primary addiction.

Tobacco consumption, in all its form, is harmful and must be avoided. It is the single most preventable cause of death in the world. Tobacco smoke contains over 7,000 chemicals, including arsenic, formaldehyde, cyanide, lead, carbon monoxide, acrolein, and other poisonous substances besides nicotine

and over 70 of these are carcinogenic or cancer forming chemicals. Tobacco is linked to increased risk of several cancers, including lung, larynx, oesophagus, oral cavity and pharynx, bladder, etc.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), tobacco caused 100 million deaths in the 20th century. Tobacco kills up to half its user, about 6 million people each year. More than five million of those deaths are the result of direct tobacco use while more than 600,000 are the result of non-smokers being exposed to second-hand smoke.

Hookah or water pipe (popularly known as Shisha) has been smoked in a rural setting for generations and maybe a social ritual for many people shared with family or friends. However, it has become an urban fad. Several people, especially youngsters, think smoking hookah is safer than cigarettes.

However, with over one-lakh children taking up smoking every day worldwide, there is concern that this fad may act as a gateway to cigarette smoking, contributing to serious addiction with significant health implication, especially amongst the young.

Hookah is much unhealthier and more addictive than cigarettes. A cigarette smoker takes 8 to 12 puffs from each cigarette over 5-7 minutes, with each puff delivering about 50-75 ml of smoke. This means they inhale 0.5 litres from a single cigarette. By contrast, hookah smokers inhale more often, and for more extended periods and inhale as much as a litre of smoke with each puff. Because a hookah session can go on for a half-hour or more, smokers take as many as 50 to 200 puffs per session. This means they inhale ten times as often as the typical cigarette smoker, and each inhalation contains as much as ten times the amount of smoke obtained from an entire cigarette. Scientists have estimated that by puffing longer and inhaling puffs

of higher volume, a hookah smoker could inhale the equivalent of 100 cigarettes (equivalent to five packs) or more during a single hookah session. Smoke from a single hookah session contains approximately 36 times the tar, 1.7 times the nicotine, and 8.3 times the carbon monoxide as the smoke produced by one cigarette.

Unsurprisingly, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, in 2017, amended the prohibition of Smoking in Public Places Act and issued a ban on Hookah in public places across the country.

As with Vaping or e-Cigarettes, it seems to have become another urban fad, wherein even those who never smoked cigarettes are venturing into it. In the USA, it is the most commonly used form of tobacco among youth. Easy access, availability, alluring adverts, various e-liquid flavours, and the belief that they are safer than cigarettes have helped make them appealing to this age group.

Some research suggests that e-cigarettes might be less harmful than cigarettes when people who regularly smoke switch to them as a complete replacement. However, apart from Nicotine in e-liquids, the lungs are exposed to other toxic chemicals and metal nanoparticles from the device itself. Certain e-liquids of cig-a-like brands contain high levels of nickel and chromium and cadmium (also found in cigarette smoke causing breathing problems) which may come from the nichrome heating coils of the vaporising device. More research is needed on the health consequences of repeated exposure to these chemicals.

While e-cigarettes may help lower nicotine cravings in those, who are trying to quit smoking, however, they are not an FDA-approved quit aid, and there is no conclusive scientific evidence on the effectiveness of e-cigarettes for long-term smoking cessation.