

Waterpipe Smoking

April 2017

Background

Waterpipe smoking, also known as hookah, narghile and shisha, dates back several centuries. Its origin is traced to India and also to South Africa, Persia and Ethiopia.¹

Using a waterpipe involves smoking products known as “shisha.” Traditional tobacco shisha is a mixture of tobacco and water, and sometimes mixed with glycerin and/or honey.

Tobacco-containing shisha is sometimes marketed as “washed” or “unwashed.” Washing tobacco does not affect nicotine levels and tobacco still contains dangerous chemicals after being washed.

Shisha is also available without tobacco and the non-tobacco products are often described as “herbal.” Flavouring has been added to most products to make them more appealing including many non-traditional flavours (such as those inspired by cocktails and energy drinks). Over the past two decades shisha has become increasingly commercialized in Alberta with both tobacco and purported non-tobacco-containing products readily available.

Because public waterpipe venues do not require a unique business license, accurate information on the number of venues in Alberta is not readily available. However, in 2014, there were approximately 38 public waterpipe venues in Alberta,² and this number has been increasing since then.

Waterpipe smoking and disease

Tobacco smoke from waterpipes has been linked to diseases also known to be associated with

cigarette use. Such diseases include malignancies, cardiovascular disease, lung diseases, pregnancy complications, oral or dental complications, hematologic disturbances and genetic abnormalities.³

The charcoal used to heat waterpipes adds additional health risks as it produces high levels of CO, metals and cancer-causing chemicals.⁴

Recent Alberta research has found that even the non-tobacco, or “herbal” shisha products used in waterpipes produce toxic air pollutants – including carbon monoxide, volatile aldehydes and polyaromatic hydrocarbons. In fact, both the main-stream and second-hand smoke produced by herbal shisha contained these known cancer-causing agents at levels equal to or greater than that of tobacco products.⁵ The same research study also found toxic trace metals and carcinogens – at levels equal to or greater than those in cigarettes – in three raw herbal shisha products tested.⁵

Air quality in Shisha venues affects not only owners/operators of waterpipe venues, but also employees. If the waterpipe venue is part of a multi-unit building, people in adjacent units may also be adversely affected. Ventilation is not an option because a ventilation system with the technology to eliminate the carcinogens in tobacco smoke does not exist.⁶

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Waterpipe users are at an increased risk of communicable diseases like herpes and meningococcal disease that are transmitted through sharing waterpipe mouthpieces.⁷

The increased popularity of commercial waterpipe venues has coincided with the availability of flavoured shisha. Today's new shisha flavours include bubble gum, classic mojito, cosmopolitan, passion kiss, straw- berry margarita, code 69 and sex on the beach.

Overtly flavoured shisha is not traditional, nor are venues that have recently opened in Alberta.⁸ An online feature^{9,10} for a shisha bar in Calgary describes its superior sound system, spacious dance floor and top-shelf liquor, which are untraditional settings for waterpipe use. Other venues in Alberta that offer public waterpipe use promote onsite DJs and TVs to watch sports.¹⁰

Inaccurate content labelling

Shisha packaging in Canada varies from unmarked containers to designer tins. There are no labelling standards for shisha in Canada. Without laboratory analysis, it is difficult to accurately identify all the constituents of these products. As such, consumers are not able to readily assess the contents to know what they are purchasing and consuming.

Several Canadian tests conducted on shisha labelled as herbal determined that the products contained tobacco. Testing conducted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in 2010 of the shisha brand, "Massoul" labelled as herbal contained tobacco.¹¹

Testing conducted by public health officials in Ottawa, Toronto and New York City has determined that tobacco was present within products sold at

lounges, although customers were told that the items were tobacco free.¹² Some waterpipe venues in Alberta prepare their own "mixes" of shisha, using Red Bull or Monster Juice, which adds to the complexity of monitoring these products. However It doesn't change the health risks associated with the products.

Testing these products is logistically difficult and there is not existing capacity to comprehensively test shisha products for tobacco content.

Banning public waterpipe use in other jurisdictions

Public waterpipe use was banned in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan.¹³⁻¹⁶ Quebec has also banned indoor public tobacco and non-tobacco waterpipe use (Waterpipe venues that existed in 2005 when the provincial law was passed were exempt). Vancouver has banned indoor public use of tobacco and non-tobacco waterpipes. Ottawa recently banned tobacco and non-tobacco water-pipe tobacco use on municipal property.

Indoor public use of waterpipes in Alberta exposes Albertans to carcinogens and other contaminants in public venues. This undermines the Tobacco Reduction Act's fundamental objective to protect Albertans from exposure to carcinogens and other contaminants in public venues.

Alberta Health's Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health recommended in 2012 that waterpipe use should be prohibited in enclosed public places and work-places, and within five metres of entrances, windows and air intakes in public venues and workplaces. AHS supports these recommendations and continues to advocate for clean air legislation to protect against exposure to waterpipe smoke.

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In November, 2013 the government of Alberta passed Bill 33 – The Tobacco Reduction Amendment Act, and Bill 206 – The Tobacco Reduction (Flavoured Tobacco Products) Amendment Act. On November, 2014, the Alberta government proclaimed two aspects of Bill 33 which are now in effect. In June 2015, the sale of most flavoured tobacco products was banned and in September 30, 2015, the sale of menthol flavoured tobacco products in Alberta was banned.

Other key admendments related to tobacco like products and address the health concerns related to waterpipe smoking have not been proclaimed yet.^{17, 18}

This document supplements the AHS Strategic Brief, Waterpipe tobacco use.

For more information, please contact Alberta Health Services Tobacco Reduction Program at tru@albertahealthservices.ca or on 780-422-1350.

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