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Tuesday, August 15, 2006

- [Main Index](#)
- [-- News Talk](#)
- [Wayne](#)
- [Oakland](#)
- [Macomb](#)
- [Livingston](#)
- [Commuting](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [-- Death Notices](#)
- [Schools](#)
- [Special Reports](#)
- [Detroit History](#)
- [Michigan's Best](#)

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- [Homepage](#)
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- [Weather](#)
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- [Crossword](#)
- [Sudoku](#)
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- [Editorials](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [CyberSurveys](#)
- [Forums](#)
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- [Autos Insider](#)
- [Autos Weblog](#)
- [Drive](#)
- [-- New Car Photos](#)
- [-- Car Reviews](#)
- [-- Latest Deals](#)
- [-- Model Reports](#)
- [Joyrides](#)
- [Dream Cruise](#)
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- [Careers](#)
- [-- Find a Job](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
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Velvet S. McNeil / The Detroit News

Jacob Yeung, 24, from left, David White, 22, Mike Grant, 29, and Liam Stockwell, 25, share a hookah at Beirut Palace, a Middle Eastern restaurant in Royal Oak. An owner of Beirut Palace says they "check ID of all young people" who ask for a hookah.

Hooked on hookahs

Teens' water pipe use raises health worries

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

TROY -- Mike Dahlberg is not old enough to smoke, but he picked up the vice while looking for new ways to have fun with friends.

Dahlberg, 17, didn't turn to cigarettes. Like an increasing number of teens and young adults in Metro Detroit, he was drawn to the hookah, an ornate water pipe popular in the Middle East that's used to smoke fruit-flavored tobacco.

The rising popularity of hookahs in restaurants and homes has health officials concerned. Despite myths to the contrary, evidence suggests that puffing them is at least as dangerous as smoking cigarettes.

"It's a growing threat for our state, for

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[-- Death Notices](#)
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[Detroit History](#)
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[Nation/World](#)
[Politics/Gov](#)
[-- Election](#)
[Health](#)
[Religion](#)
[Technology](#)
[Sports](#)
[Lions/NFL](#)
[Pistons/NBA](#)
[Red Wings/NHL](#)
[Tigers/MLB](#)
[Shock/WNBA](#)
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Michigan, and down the road will mean higher health care costs as (users) develop the diseases that come from smoking," said Virginia Hill Rice, a professor at Wayne State University College and the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute.

The hookah, experts say, contains dangerous amounts of nicotine, tar and heavy metals, which can lead to life-threatening health problems such as lung cancer.

The use of water pipes makes the anti-smoking crusade difficult because the tobacco is doused in honey or molasses and comes in flavors like double apple, strawberry-banana and apricot. Many users also mistakenly think the pipe is safer than cigarettes because the smoke passes through a receptacle of water, which they falsely believe filters out harmful chemicals.

Others are drawn to the social aspects of the pipe, also known as narghile, argileh and shisha.

"It's something all my friends can do without spending a lot of money," said Dahlberg, a Bloomfield Hills resident.

His mother, Peggy Dahlberg, isn't happy about it. "But it's the lesser of the three or four other evils," she said. "It's a pick-your-battles thing."

Cafes rent the device for a one-time smoke for \$10 to \$20. Hookahs retail for \$14 to \$200 and tobacco costs \$7 to \$8 for 14 smokes that last about an hour each.

Metro Detroit health officials believe the area's significant Middle Eastern population is fueling the recent popularity.

Some Middle Eastern parents who discourage cigarette smoking allow their children to use the water pipe because of tradition, said Anahid Kulwicki, Wayne County public health director.

"It's (also) becoming popular among non-Arabs and this is behavior we don't want to promote," Kulwicki said.

Jon Clark started smoking water pipes in a cafe and later bought one. He now looks for venues that offer water pipe smoking when he travels outside Michigan for his job at Chrysler Group.

Yet Clark, who once smoked cigarettes, thinks smoking a water pipe is different.

"You can't walk around with a hookah or step outside work (for a smoke)," Clark said. "By its configuration, you are limited."

Research is limited on water pipes, but studies clearly suggest health risks, said Thomas Eissenberg, an associate professor at

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Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News
 Joseph Van Tiem, 18, shares a hookah with Margaret Leone at a friend's home in Bloomfield Hills. Experts say hookahs contain dangerous amounts of nicotine, tar and heavy metals. [See full image](#)

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Virginia Commonwealth University.

"There is a common misperception that using a water pipe to smoke tobacco is safe, and there is no evidence to support that," he said. "The evidence we have supports cardiovascular disease, cancer and nicotine dependence."

Based on a 45-minute smoking session compared to a single cigarette, studies show that water pipe smoke contains 8.4 times the amount of carbon monoxide, which can lead to cardiac disease if chronically exposed. It also contains 1.7 times more nicotine, which leads to dependence.

Perhaps most significant, the pipe smoke contains 36 times the amount of cancer-causing tar than a cigarette, Eissenberg said, and there are high levels of carcinogens and heavy metals.

Is it more dangerous than cigarettes?

"Every month I get e-mails from reporters, hookah users, concerned parents and even medical professionals asking the exact same question," Eissenberg said. "Unfortunately, my answer is that, as of today, the required studies have not been done. (But) there is no evidence that water pipe use is less dangerous than cigarette smoking."

One in five deaths in the United States is smoking related, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And experts say smokers often begin before age 18, which is why Michigan bans the sale of all tobacco to minors.

The only U.S. survey of adolescent youth use of water pipes, conducted in Dearborn, showed that 30 percent of ninth-graders and 43 percent of 12th-graders had tried the water pipe, according to Rice, the Wayne State professor and the study's principal investigator.

Besides warning about health risks, Wayne County officials recently began reminding businesses that it's illegal to sell tobacco for water pipes to minors, a point some area businesses say they already follow.

"We check ID of all young people," said Ali Ahmad, an owner of Royal Oak's Beirut Palace.

Water pipes are a growing industry nationwide: Smokeshop Magazine reported two years ago that 200 to 300 new water pipe cafes had opened in the U.S. since 1999, and many were near college campuses. A local wholesaler said he had more than \$1 million in sales last year to tobacco shops, water pipe cafes and stores across the country.

"This year I am going to be probably triple that amount in sales," said Akram Allos, owner of Oak Park's Tobacco Imports USA.

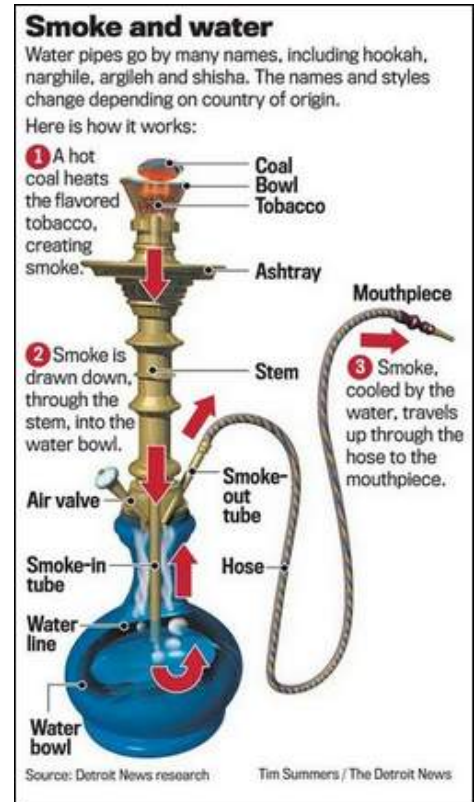
For Gerrit Littrup's 18th birthday, friends bought him a 35-inch hookah from Israel that they use several times a week in their parents' homes.

"They don't like it," said Littrup, of Bloomfield Hills, "but I am 18, so they can't really do anything about it."

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