

12-03

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Supporting Local Legislation to Ban Hookah Smoking

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) supports legislation and programs to reduce and eliminate the harmful public health effects of hookah smoking. This includes any or all of the following possible measures:

- Interdisciplinary educational initiatives addressing attitudes, knowledge, myths, and beliefs about hookah smoking and related outcomes to correct misperceptions, particularly among adolescents and young adults
- Legislation to ban or limit the establishment of hookah lounges in local communities
- Legislation to create a moratorium on the establishment of additional hookah lounges until appropriate bans are in place
- Legislation to add health warning labels related to tobacco use on hookah products and in hookah establishments
- Revision of existing local smoke-free policy to include hookah lounges and establishments (n.b.: through clarifying opinion or regulation/rule; opening up or amending the definitions of “smoke” and “smoking” to include hookah may jeopardize existing laws)
- Opposition to any legislation at the local or state level which exempts hookah lounges and other hookah smoking establishments from current smoking ban policies and regulations
- Partnerships with other organizations and educational systems to educate and inform the public on the negative health effects associated with hookah smoking and lounges
- Partnerships with law enforcement to better enforce relevant laws related to hookah lounges, such as minor in possession laws to reduce youth access
- Advocate for legislation requiring health warnings on hookah and shisha, similar to those seen on other tobacco products

Additionally, NACCHO supports any initiatives that would increase the research and knowledge base surrounding hookah smoking and its health-related impact.

NACCHO urges LHDs to support legislation to help hookah users quit, prevent youth from starting, and protect people from secondhand smoke from hookah use.



Justification

A hookah, or water pipe, is a single or multi-stemmed smoking instrument, often made of glass, consisting of a smoke chamber, a bowl, a pipe, and a hose.¹ Hookah smoking consists of tobacco that is heated by charcoal, filtered through water, and then distributed to the consumer through a plastic or leather hose. Traditionally, hookah was embedded in the traditional cultures of Turkey, the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan, India, and parts of Africa and its use was a ceremonial activity governed by strict rules for usage.² Today, hookahs are primarily used recreationally by young adults in retail tobacco establishments called hookah lounges and cafes, many of which are currently cropping up near college campuses and throughout large cities.

According to one historical account, hookah was invented in India by a physician as a purportedly less harmful method of tobacco use. The physician, Hakim Abul Fath, suggested tobacco smoke should be first passed through a small receptacle of water so it would be rendered harmless, a notion credited with the widespread but unsubstantiated belief held by many hookah users today that the practice of smoking hookah is relatively safe.³

While hookah smoking has not been studied as intensively as cigarette smoking, preliminary research on patterns of smoking, the chemistry of the smoke that is inhaled, and health effects suggests that hookah smoking is associated with many of the same risks as cigarette smoking. The smoke that emerges from a hookah contains numerous toxicants, such as carbon monoxide and heavy metals, known to cause cancers of the mouth, lung, stomach, bladder, and esophagus as well as heart disease and other diseases.^{4, 5} Furthermore, due to the mode of smoking – including frequency of puffing, depth of inhalation, and length of the smoking session – hookah smokers may absorb higher concentrations of the toxins found in cigarette smoke.⁶ A typical one-hour hookah smoking session is the equivalent of inhaling smoke of 100 or more cigarettes.³ These risks are largely unknown and unappreciated by the public. A study of hookah users at various hookah lounges in San Diego revealed that the majority of frequent users – 58 percent – were more likely to believe that hookah is less harmful than cigarettes.⁷

Coupled with the consequences of smoking tobacco, hookah smoking also poses unique health risks. Because smoking sessions at hookah lounges often involve sharing among multiple individuals, consumers are at increased risk of infectious diseases, such as influenza, herpes, hepatitis, and tuberculosis.⁸ Additionally, the charcoal used to heat the tobacco in the hookah exposes consumers to high levels of carbon monoxide, heavy metals, and cancer-causing chemicals.^{3, 5} Furthermore, risk from secondhand smoke poses a serious hazard for non-smokers, particularly because it contains smoke not only from the tobacco but from the charcoal heat source as well.^{3, 5} Secondhand smoke levels in hookah lounges have been found to be higher than in other smoking-permitted establishments. An air testing study in North Carolina found that secondhand smoke levels in commercial hookah establishments were more than twice those found in nearby smoking-permitted bars.⁹ An additional air testing study in Oregon measuring the fine particle (PM_{2.5}) air pollution in 10 hookah lounges found a median peak PM_{2.5} of 161, which is classified as “very unhealthy” according to the EPA Quality Air Index.¹⁰ These levels are exceptionally hazardous not only to patrons of hookah lounges but also the individuals who work in them.

Despite the nationwide spread of policies and regulation to ban smoking in restaurants, bars, and the workplace, hookah lounges, which are primarily utilized by young adults, have continued to thrive, cropping up throughout the United States. Furthermore, even though hookah lounges often violate regulations dealing with indoor tobacco consumption and clean air laws by attempting to utilize exemptions that technically cannot apply to hookah lounges,¹¹ they rarely face penalty or prosecution. Of the hookah companies responsible for providing and selling hookah, especially on the internet, over half do not include the word “tobacco” within their product descriptions.¹² These entities also fail to provide a health warning label concerning tobacco use and do not require verification for the age of individuals purchasing hookah. A study by the University of Pittsburgh found that less than one percent of online businesses promoting hookah smoking and products provided a tobacco-warning label, while none of the hookah tobacco web pages required any type of age verification.¹²

With the growing trend of smoke-free college campuses, it may be possible to examine these particular efforts for future insight into banning hookah smoking. The BACCHUS Network, specifically, has taken an extensive role in addressing hookah use among teens and young adults in the United States by providing substantial support for campus tobacco control and other health promotion control programs nationwide. Partnering with local colleges and universities to implement and reinforce bans on hookah smoking may be an effective route in establishing legislation and enforcement of legislation on hookah smoking and establishments. Colleges, universities, and additional like-minded community organizations may also be viable partners in both policy initiatives and the field of research. Finally, LHDs may also find beneficial partnerships with the BACCHUS Network, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. Even in countries with close cultural ties to hookah and hookah smoking, officials have implemented bans prohibiting indoor use. In 2009, Turkey implemented tobacco free laws in restaurants, coffee houses, and bars,¹³ and, over the past several years, officials in India have worked to ban the establishment of hookah bars in various states,¹⁴ demonstrating that the concern over hookah smoking and its related health risks transcend traditional and cultural ties.

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Record of Action

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Approved by NACCHO Board of Directors

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