

Chippewa Valley Coalition hosts hazards of hookah presentation

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Ann Najar of the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services in Dearborn explained how a hookah works to members of the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families on April 15. | (Photo by NICOLE TUTTLE)

With hookah lounges available in Macomb, Shelby and Clinton townships as well as Sterling Heights, blowing smoke rings like the caterpillar in “Alice in Wonderland” has become a dangerous trend among teens, according to Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families Executive Director Charlene McGunn.

“There are health dangers with hookahs... We are hearing more and more about it and we are always wanting to educate on issues. This was an area not covered,” McGunn said.

One reason that the coalition decided to offer the presentation on hookahs on April 15 was due to focus group studies conducted in February among high school students in the Chippewa Valley Schools District, according to McGunn. She said the studies illustrated increased hookah use compared to two years ago.

“We were getting more information from students that there is increased hookah use,” she said.

McGunn estimated that between 40 and 50 people attended the coalition meeting, which was held at the Chippewa Valley Schools administration building in Clinton Township. Some of those in attendance were high school students from two of the district’s high schools, members of the coalition’s Teen Councils.

The presentation on the hazards of hookah was offered by Ann Najar of the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services in Dearborn.

“The hookah came from India and it was primitive... Then the Arab world got the hookah and then they made it theirs. And then it went to Turkey,” she said.

Najar said that hookah is popular in the Dearborn area and a growing number of European and American teens are using hookahs.

“Hookah is used mostly by Middle Easterners; however, I have been seeing it more in your area, even Grand

Rapids, Saginaw and other states. And it did start in Dearborn, unfortunately,” Najjar said.

Najar said that hookah is often also called other names, such as water pipe, hubble bubble or shisha.

Najar brought a hookah to the meeting to illustrate its different parts. A hookah is a water pipe used to smoke tobacco through cooled water, and has long cord pipes through which smokers draw smoke, according to Najar. Tobacco is heated in a bowl at the top of the hookah and the smoke goes through the water in the base. In most hookah pipes, hot charcoal heats the tobacco, which is often flavored.

“What I have been noticing is they don’t just smoke water here, sometimes people smoke vodka here, so they can get their nicotine mixed with alcohol,” Najar said.

Teens also sometimes put marijuana between the tobacco, according to Najar.

“At some point the nicotine is not going to work for you anymore. You are going to build your tolerance, so you are going to need something different,” Najar said.

Najar said that there are many myths about hookah, including that it is a safer, non-addictive alternative to cigarettes.

“The fact is the chemicals associated with cigarettes are the same as hookah and tobacco products, plus the charcoal that we talked about, that is used for the heating process, and it releases higher levels of carbon monoxide,” Najar said. “And then we hear another myth, and that is the water inside of the hookah filters out the tobacco smoke from the harmful substances. But the fact is that the water only cools the tobacco smoke.”

The cooling allows people to inhale smoke deeper into their lungs and for a longer period, according to Najar.

Najar said that another myth is that the smell, taste and smoothness of flavored tobacco provide less irritation to airways.

“That is not true. That just helps you to smoke hookah longer and deeper, and you are more exposed to toxic substances but you don’t know it, because they make a flavor to fool you,” Najar said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has done hookah research, comparing it with cigarettes, and found that hookah smoking carries many of the same health risks according to Najar. “Water pipe smoking delivers the addictive drug nicotine, and it is at least as toxic as cigarette smoke,” Najar said.

The mode of smoking, frequency of puffing, depth of inhalation and length of smoking sessions cause hookah smokers to absorb higher concentrations of toxins than those found in cigarettes, according to Najar.

“A typical one-hour long hookah smoking session involves 100 to 200 times of the volume of smoke inhaled from a single cigarette,” Najar said.

Najar said that hookah smokers are at risk for the same kinds of diseases as cigarette smokers, including oral cancer, lung cancer, stomach cancer, cancer of the esophagus, reduced lung function and decreased fertility. Secondhand smoke poses risks for non-smokers as well, Najar said.

“The charcoal used to heat the tobacco in the hookah increases the health risks by producing high levels of carbon monoxide... metals, and cancer causing chemicals,” Najar said.

Sharing hookahs can increase the risk of transmitting diseases such as tuberculosis, viruses like herpes and hepatitis as well as other illnesses, she added.

“For that people have been changing this hose to a disposable hose... And they tell you no, this is better for you and then you won’t get herpes or tuberculosis because we are giving you a brand new one. But then what they do, they start the hookah for you. So they are inhaling all of their germs and their viruses into the hookah and then they put the hose on for you, when then you will inhale the same viruses and the same bacteria that they have,” Najjar said.

Using a new mouthpiece does not help as inhaling from the same hose and hookah can still expose users to germs, according to Najjar.

She said many labels on hookah tobacco are often labeled misleadingly, with claims of no tar or nicotine. The packages are often imported from the Middle East, Najjar said.

“The FDA does not test out those products that are imported from Syria, that are imported from Egypt and it says zero percent nicotine, it is herbal, it is good for you. When it is not, it does contain tobacco, it does contain nicotine and it is really bad for you,” Najjar said.

She said that more young adults in high school and college are using hookah as it is perceived as something new and often costs about \$11.

“Middle Easterners say, ‘You can’t take our culture away, hookah is our culture.’ But then I see it more with American kids now. They are smoking hookah because they think it is something cool, and it is something new. But it is really bad for you. And it is not your culture and it is not our culture either. It is nobody’s culture. It is bad,” Najjar said.

Najjar said that even some teenagers under 18 have access to hookah.

“I know that they don’t check ID’s at these lounges. These teens are way younger than 18 years old. I have seen 14, I have seen 13 and even younger,” Najjar said.

Najjar also said that the Michigan Smoke-Free Workplace Law prohibits food preparation, food service and related activities with tobacco products.

“However, a lot of cafes and lounges, in fact most of them, that serve hookah, they serve food with that. And they get around the law by acting like they are separating the kitchen from the lounge and then they will serve on disposable plates acting like it is a separate business, but it is not really, and they are serving hookah with food,” Najjar said.

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