

Hookahed on a Feeling

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For my eleventh birthday, my parents took me and a bunch of my friends to see 'Return of the Jedi.' It was three long years since we learned that Darth Vader was Luke Skywalker's father. We couldn't wait to see the saga's conclusion.

I remember being blown away by the opening scenes, which introduced Jabba the Hutt. Jabba was an enormous, slug-like gangster unlike any villain I had ever seen before. He ate live spider-frogs out of a bowl and smoked a huge pipe that was connected by a long tube to a bowl of liquid.

Wanting to learn everything I could about the movie and Jabba the Hutt, I discovered that Jabba was smoking a hookah pipe. I was more surprised to learn that hookah pipes actually existed and weren't a creation from a galaxy far, far away.

Thirty years later, I'm equally shocked to learn that smoking hookahs is actually on the rise. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released a study revealing that more middle and high school students are smoking electronic cigarettes, cigars and hookahs. The study was compiled from data gleaned from the 2012 National Youth Tobacco Survey, which polls 25,000 sixth- through twelfth-graders across the country about their tobacco use habits and attitudes towards smoking.

The use of e-cigarettes, cigars and hookahs increased across all age groups compared to prior years. The category of cigars also included cigarillos, or small candy- or fruit-flavored cigars. Sold individually, cigarillos are less expensive tobacco products and are taxed at a lower rate.

Like cigarillos, the popularity of hookahs is also attributable to their flavors, which include apple, mint, cherry, chocolate, coconut, licorice, cappuccino, and watermelon. They also have a social element, as hookahs are often smoked in groups, with the mouthpiece being passed from person to person. There are even hookah cafés springing up around the country.

Another factor contributing to the increased use of e-cigarettes, cigars and hookahs is that these tobacco products are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. Without this regulation, these products are heavily marketed and readily available. The CDC believes this results in a misconception by consumers, especially kids, that they're safer than cigarettes.

The CDC, therefore, is quick to point out that users of cigars and hookahs are smoking tobacco, which is just as addictive and deadly as traditional cigarettes. In response, the FDA indicated that it intends to increase the regulation of non-cigarette nicotine products like e-cigarettes and hookahs. The CDC researchers asked the FDA to increase the price of these products, have public service announcements warning of their dangers, and restrict the advertising and promotion of these products.

The CDC also pointed out that more Americans will qualify for assistance to quit smoking under the Affordable Care Act.

Even if Jabba the Hutt quits smoking, he still has to work on lowering his cholesterol.

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