

smoking

is it really that bad?

shisha



As the TV showed scenes of Libyan protesters, Fay Qian eyed the hose apprehensively, unsure of how to hold it. It was utterly alien to her.

Her first pull made her eyes water. She coughed and gagged.

Qian is a second year University of Toronto international student, originally from Shanghai, China. She was a shisha virgin until she visited a couple of shisha cafes and introduced her taste buds along with her lungs to a mixed rose and mint shisha at Markaz.

Shisha goes by many names, all of them equally valid: hookah, narguil, waterpipe, hubble-bubble. Some people describe it as another instrument to smoke weed in. Others say

it's a way of life and that it's addictive only in terms of the social factor. But why exactly is shisha becoming a growing trend amongst Toronto's youth?

Universities now always have a few students lighting up a shisha outdoors, attracting curious looks from others. It's even normal to have a group of friends who have just one thing in common: shisha.

Preparing shisha looks complicated but it's incredibly easy to pack and use at home or outdoors. Tobacco or herbal flavor is burnt in a ceramic bowl at the top of a vertical metal pipe that descends into a glass bowl of water. A hose connected to the metal pipe allows the smoker to pull on the burning flavor, pass it through the water that acts as a cooling agent, and then take the smoke through the mouth.

According to a policy analyst from the Non-Smokers' Rights Association, that may not be the case.

"I call it smoking on training wheels," Pippa Beck said.

"We have evidence that smoking tobacco in a water pipe is not healthier than smoking cigarettes, which is a common misunderstanding. A lot of people think going through the water purifies the smoke but the water actually just moisturizes and cools the smoke."

Many shisha connoisseurs call it an effective way to quit smoking cigarettes and a safer alternative, claiming that it isn't as bad as smoking a "cancer stick."



Shisha bars and restaurants are more common than you think. Downtown Toronto has several places where anyone can walk in and get a taste of what it's like to smoke legally indoors.

Sham Ahmed is a former political lobbyist who opened up his own shisha café in the core of Toronto's entertainment district - right next to a busy Yuk Yuk's on Richmond Street West.

The menu describes the place as a Middle Eastern-Pakistani restaurant. A small blurb in the shisha section quietly reminds customers to "avoid foul language and speaking loudly," with a cheeky "Life is short. Smoke shisha."

"They don't go after smoking cigarettes so much as they go after other vices," he explained. "It really depends on what effects or what the broader community likes. The broader community likes to drink. The broader community does not smoke."

He muses over the number of times people walk by his restaurant, have a double-take at seeing people smoke indoors and then immediately think he's breaking the city's smoking ban. "They call the city and the city tells them, no, this place is legitimate, this is what they're doing over there," he said. "They just don't know."

A shisha café can serve tobacco products outdoors on its premises as long as half the smoking area is open-air. Ahmed's colourful sheets are a play on the traditional décor of shisha cafes in Pakistan as well as allowing him to abide by the law. Legally, shisha can be smoked wherever you want, as long as you take into account that a café can only serve you herbal shisha indoors and tobacco outdoors. There is also a minimum age for smoking shisha, whether herbal or tobacco: customers have to prove that they're 19 years or older in order to be served.

"If you don't have that, we're not desperate for your business," Ahmed said firmly. "We just turn you away if you don't."

Maryam Shah enjoys shisha and watching Ryan Gosling movies. Tweet your opinion @MaryamMShah