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Thousands of youth addicted to sheesha: Survey

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ISLAMABAD: In its latest report, TheNetwork, an NGO working for the consumer rights, claims thousands of youngsters in Pakistan are addicted to a relatively new tobacco product, sheesha (hookah), due to its unrestrained publicity and trouble-free availability in hotels, restaurants and sheesha bars in major cities, including Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

The restaurants and bars offer sheesha as a recreational group activity to youngsters in sheer defiance of the 'Prohibition of Smoking in Enclosed Places and Protection of Non-Smokers Health Ordinance 2002', says the NGO in its report based on a survey conducted in the

twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

A modern form of Arabian hookah, sheesha is called as nargila in Lebanon, sheesha in Egypt and hookah in English language and it is relatively a new phenomenon in Pakistan.

Sheesha's basic structure is built of glass the upper most part of which is known as tobacco bowl where sheesha mixture is placed over a charcoal tray. A burning coal provides heat to the mixture of tobacco and fruit flavours. And this is the only difference between the traditional hookah and sheesha that tobacco is not directly burnt in sheesha as in the case of hookah and rather, it is melted by burning the

coal.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently released a report on the health consequences of sheesha use and it has proved to be an eye-opener. Sheesha smoking sessions last for 20-80 minutes, during which the smoker may take anywhere between 50 and 200 puffs. The sheesha smoker may, therefore, inhale as much smoke during one session as a cigarette smoker would inhale consuming 100 or more cigarettes.

Even after it has passed through water, the smoke produced by a sheesha contains a high-level of toxins, including carbon monoxide, heavy metals and other carcinogens.

TheNetwork report says that a survey done on youngsters of school-going age in Karachi recently showed that almost 70 percent had tried sheesha in the past six months, and this included children as young as seven.

Survey observed that sheesha smoking has turned into a snobbish value and status symbol. It is also propagated successfully that sheesha is not a tobacco product, while the fact is that the paste, the smoke of which is inhaled contains tobacco and molasses along with some fruit flavours.

The report says that like the traditional tobacco industry, the sheesha industry also targets youngsters. "Besides attaching a lot of

attraction to sheesha for youngsters, sheesha smoking is successfully linked with the social status."

During the field survey, it was found that 50 percent of big hotels and restaurants offer sheesha smoking. "Besides that many sheesha bars are opened in the commercial and residential areas of the twin cities, which exclusively offer sheesha with various flavours," it says.

New ways and means are being adopted to promote sheesha smoking. Hotels, restaurants and bars provide such an environment to sheesha smokers that it becomes attractive for youngsters and first time visitors. Semi-dark rooms with light music and Arabic dance on TV make the environment romantic.

The attractive design of hookah, menu and paste packet offering a variety of flavours against varied prices make the young groups able to celebrate some smoking as a group recreational activity.

In a smoking session, which normally culminates in an hour, an individual takes 200 puffs of sheesha means that inhaling eight cigarettes. "The unchecked outdoor advertisements of sheesha bars and restaurants in the form of billboards and posters also play a vital role in attracting more and more people to this activity," report added.

Report says that according to the Prohibition of Smoking in Enclosed Places and Protection of Non-Smokers Health Ordinance

2002, smoking is not allowed at enclosed public places including hotels and restaurants but the implementation of law in the context of sheesha smoking is invisible.

The fragrance of this flavoured liquid enters into the inhaling pipe and sweetens the puffs. Sheesha is an expensive hookah, which costs from Rs6,000 to Rs12,000. The mixture used in the tobacco bowl costs between Rs260 to Rs800 depending upon the quality and quantity of the ingredients.

The tobacco bowl can be filled 12 times with the help of using smallest packet of the mixture. This mixture is imported or smuggled from the UAE, Syria and Egypt.



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