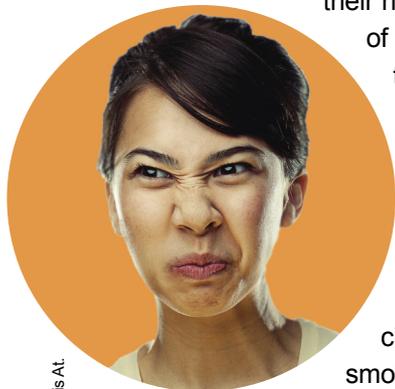


Secondhand smoke: Their cigarettes can make you sick

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

If you've ever eaten in a smoky restaurant, walked past a smoker on the street or been to a party where people were smoking, you've been exposed to secondhand smoke. With every puff they take, smokers put their health and the health of the people around them at risk.



Photos and art courtesy iStockphoto. Ashtray photo by Chris At.

Secondhand smoke — the combination of smoke that comes from the burning end of a cigarette, cigar or pipe and the smoke exhaled by the

smoker — is far more than just annoying. Among nonsmokers, about 46,000 heart disease deaths and 3,400 lung cancer deaths are caused by secondhand smoke each year. Some research suggests that breathing in other people's smoke may increase the risk of breast cancer and nasal sinus cancer.

Though state and local smoke-free laws are a breath of fresh air, 88 million nonsmoking Americans ages 3 and older are exposed to secondhand smoke each year. A 2006 U.S.

surgeon general's report noted that non-smokers who live with smokers have a 20 percent to 30 percent greater chance of developing lung cancer.

"One of the most important discoveries we have made regarding the health of the public over the last 15 or 20 years has been the devastating effects of secondhand smoke, which we now know is a killer," said Norman H. Edelman, MD, chief medical officer for the American Lung Association. "It kills by causing lung cancer. It kills by causing heart attacks. And it causes a lot of extra disease burden."

According to the National Cancer Institute, about 250 of the more than 7,000 chemicals in secondhand tobacco smoke are known to be harmful, and about 70 of them cause cancer. Some of the chemicals in this toxic mix are the same things used to make chemical weapons, lighter fluid, pesticides, car batteries, paint thinners and other substances you would never dream of inhaling into your lungs.

Researchers are also beginning to look into whether thirdhand smoke is harmful to health.

"Thirdhand smoke is the residual fumes on draperies and furniture in a room after a smoker has left, and we are beginning to get some evidence that thirdhand smoke may be bad for health," Edelman says.

Thirdhand smoke triggers an inflammatory response, and when people are especially sensitive, they may get an asthma attack.

"Thirdhand smoke is a big problem and it is hard to deal with except to insist, if you live in a private home, that nobody smoke in the home, period," Edelman says.

Thirdhand smoke can linger long after smokers move out of a home. In one study, researchers detected nicotine on the hands of almost half of nonsmokers living in homes that had previously been occupied by smokers.

No butts about it: Kids at risk

Even brief exposure to secondhand smoke harms your heart and lungs, but that's just the tip of the smokestack. When your baby



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breathes in someone's smoke, she or he is being exposed to the same toxins and cancer-causing substances as the smoker. Children are more heavily exposed to secondhand smoke than adults. In fact, almost 60 percent of U.S. children ages 3 to 11 are exposed to secondhand smoke each year, putting them at increased risk for severe respiratory problems, including bronchitis, pneumonia, ear infections and more

frequent and severe asthma attacks. Secondhand smoke also increases a child's risk of sudden infant death syndrome. Higher levels of nicotine have been found in the lungs of babies who die from the syndrome — also called SIDS — than those who die from other causes.

"Because their bodies are still developing, infants and young children are especially vulnerable to the poisons in secondhand smoke," says Vince Willmore, a spokesman for the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

Parents can take steps to protect their kids from secondhand smoke, such as ensuring their homes and cars are smoke-free, and that places frequented by their children are also free of smoke, Willmore said.

"First and foremost, if a parent smokes, the best way to protect their child is to quit smoking," he says.



Strong smoke-free laws are key

The science is clear: There is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. The solution is equally clear: Strong smoke-free laws are the only way to completely protect nonsmokers from secondhand smoke. Some restaurants and bars provide nonsmoking sections, but separating smokers from nonsmokers and even ventilating buildings doesn't completely protect you.

In the past decade, 25 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws banning smoking in workplaces, restaurants and bars, leading to health improvements.

"In some communities, the number of heart attacks has decreased by as much as 25 percent after

public smoking has been banned," Edelman says.



American Public
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