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Secondhand Smoke

What is secondhand smoke?

Secondhand smoke is the smoke given off by the burning end of a cigarette, pipe, or cigar. It is also the smoke exhaled from the lungs of smokers. When nonsmokers breathe this smoke, it is called passive smoking. Exposure to tobacco smoke is dangerous to everyone.

What are the dangers of secondhand smoke?

Every time someone smokes, poisons are released into the air from the burning end of the cigarette, cigar, or pipe, and from the exhaled smoke. Like asbestos and radon, tobacco smoke is a group A carcinogen, which means it is a proven cause of cancer in humans. Tobacco smoke contains over 2,000 poisonous chemicals, including formaldehyde, cyanide, carbon monoxide, ammonia, and nicotine. Of these, over 60 are known to cause cancer in humans or animals.

Each year, many nonsmokers die from lung cancer as a result of breathing secondhand smoke. In addition to lung cancer, secondhand smoke can cause:

- death from heart disease
- worsened asthma symptoms and more asthma attacks
- irritation of the eyes, nose, and throat
- cervical cancer
- increased menstrual pain
- low birth weight in newborns
- nausea
- hoarseness.

Children exposed to secondhand smoke in the home or at day care are more likely to get sick. Illnesses they may have because of the smoke are:

- asthma
- frequent upper respiratory infections, such as colds
- ear infections.

Exposure to cigarette smoke may be a factor in SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome). Also, research suggests possible links between mothers who smoke and attention-deficit disorder (ADHD) in their children. And there is a greater chance that children of smokers will become smokers.

If you are regularly around someone who smokes at least a few cigarettes a day, your risks of medical problems are similar to the increased risks for smokers. A nonsmoker in a very smoky room for 1 hour with several smokers inhales as many bad chemicals as someone who has actually smoked 10 or more cigarettes.

If you live or work in a smoky environment:

- You increase your chances of having a heart attack by 50%.
- Your chances of getting cancer or asthma are doubled.
- If you get pregnant, you will be at higher risk of having a miscarriage or premature delivery.

How close to tobacco smoke do you have to be for it to hurt you?

There is no safe level of tobacco smoke. However, the closer you are to the smoke coming from the end of a cigarette, cigar, or pipe, the worse your dose of dangerous chemicals. Being in a car with a smoker is especially bad, even if the windows are open. But you are also exposed to dangerous levels in homes of smokers (even with open windows), restaurants, workplaces, and anywhere that allows smoking. Smoke and the chemicals from it linger in dust and on carpet, floors, counters, and other surfaces.

Even if you drink or dine in nonsmoking areas of bars and restaurants, you will still inhale quite a bit of smoke. On average, you will inhale about 50% of the smoke you would inhale in the smoking areas.

What are some of the ways to avoid secondhand smoke?

- Try to avoid places where people smoke.
- Do not smoke in your house or car or let others do so.
- If smoking is allowed at your workplace, ask your employer to make sure you do not have to breathe other people's smoke.
- Make sure your child's day-care, school, and after-school programs are smoke-free.
- In restaurants and bars ask to be seated as far away from smokers as possible.

- Insist that nonsmoking laws (where they exist) be enforced.

Over 44 million Americans have kicked the smoking habit. By promoting smoke-free environments, we are helping to protect everyone's health.

For more information, contact your local chapter of the American Cancer Society or the American Lung Association, or visit their Web sites at <http://www.cancer.org> and <http://www.lungusa.org>.

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