

# Dangers of Secondhand Smoke



Even if you don't smoke, breathing in someone else's smoke can be deadly too. Secondhand smoke causes about 3,000 deaths from lung cancer and tens of thousands of deaths from heart disease to nonsmoking adults in the United States each year.

Millions of children are breathing in secondhand smoke in their own homes. Secondhand smoke can be especially harmful to your children's health because their lungs still are developing. If you smoke around your children or they are exposed to secondhand smoke in other places, they may be in more danger than you realize. Children whose parents smoke only outside are still exposed to the chemicals in secondhand smoke. The best way to eliminate this exposure is to quit.

Read more to learn about the dangers of secondhand smoke and how to create a smoke-free environment for your children.

## What is secondhand smoke?

Secondhand smoke (also known as environmental tobacco smoke) is the smoke a smoker breathes out and that comes from the tip of burning cigarettes, pipes, and cigars. It contains about 4,000 chemicals. Many of these chemicals are dangerous; more than 50 are known to cause cancer. Anytime children breathe in secondhand smoke they are exposed to these chemicals.

**Note:** The American Academy Pediatrics has conducted research on the effects of thirdhand smoke and found that it is also harmful. Thirdhand smoke is the smoke left behind—the harmful toxins that remain in places where people have smoked previously. Thirdhand smoke can be found in the walls of a bar, upholstery on the seats of a car, or even a child's hair after a caregiver smokes near the child.

## Your developing baby and smoke

If you smoke or are exposed to secondhand smoke when you're pregnant, your baby is exposed to harmful chemicals too. This may lead to many serious health problems, including

- Miscarriage
- Premature birth (born not fully developed)
- Lower birth weight than expected (possibly meaning a less healthy baby)
- Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- Learning problems and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

The health risks go up the longer the pregnant woman smokes or is exposed to smoke. Quitting anytime during pregnancy helps—of course, the sooner the better. All pregnant women should stay away from secondhand smoke and ask smokers not to smoke around them.

## Secondhand smoke and your children's health

Infants have a higher risk of SIDS if they are exposed to secondhand smoke. Children have a higher risk of serious health problems, or problems may become worse. Children who breathe secondhand smoke can have more

- Ear infections
- Coughs and colds
- Respiratory problems, such as bronchitis and pneumonia
- Tooth decay

Children of smokers cough and wheeze more and have a harder time getting over colds. They miss many more school days too. Secondhand smoke can cause other symptoms including stuffy nose, headache, sore throat, eye irritation, and hoarseness.

Children with asthma are especially sensitive to secondhand smoke. It may cause more asthma attacks and the attacks may be more severe, requiring trips to the hospital.

## Long-term effects of secondhand smoke

Children who grow up with parents who smoke are themselves more likely to smoke. Children and teens who smoke are affected by the same health problems that affect adults. Secondhand smoke may cause problems for children later in life including

- Poor lung development (meaning that their lungs never grow to their full potential)
- Lung cancer
- Heart disease
- Cataracts (an eye disease)

## Secondhand smoke is everywhere

Children can be exposed to secondhand smoke in many places. Even if there are no smokers in your home, your children can still be exposed to secondhand smoke. Places include

- In a car or on a bus
- At child care or school
- At a babysitter's house
- At a friend's or relative's house
- In a restaurant
- At the mall
- At sporting events or concerts
- In parks or playgrounds

## Creating a smoke-free environment

Here are tips that may help keep your children from being exposed to secondhand smoke:

- **Set the example.** If you smoke, quit today! If your children see you smoking, they may want to try it, and they may grow up smoking as well. If there are cigarettes at home, children are more likely to experiment with smoking—the first step in becoming addicted.
- **Remove your children from places where smoking is allowed, even if no one is smoking while you are there.** Chemicals from smoke can be found on surfaces in rooms days after the smoking occurred.
- **Make your home smoke-free.** Until you can quit, don't smoke inside your home and don't smoke anywhere near your children, even if you are outside. Don't put out any ashtrays. Remember, air flows throughout a house, so smoking in even one room allows smoke to go everywhere.
- **Make your car smoke-free.** Until you can quit, don't smoke inside your car. Opening windows isn't enough to clear the air.
- **Choose a babysitter who doesn't smoke.** Even if the babysitter smokes outside, your children are exposed. Consider changing babysitters to find a smoke-free environment for your children.
- **Encourage tobacco-free child care and schools.** Help your children's child care or school, including outdoor areas and teachers' lounges, become tobacco-free. Get your children involved in the effort to make schools tobacco-free!

## An important choice

If you smoke, one of the most important things you can do for your own health and the health of your children is to stop smoking. Quitting is the best way to prevent your children from being exposed to secondhand smoke.

It may be hard to quit. Talk with your doctor if you need help. There are many over-the-counter and prescription medicines that may help you quit. Also, you may find it helpful to join a stop-smoking class. Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW (800/784-8669) or contact the American Lung Association, American Heart Association, or American Cancer Society for more information about support groups where you live.

Parents need to make every effort to keep their children away from smokers and secondhand smoke. Parents who smoke should quit for their health and the health of their children.

### Fire safety

Children can be burned or start fires when they play with lit cigarettes, lighters, or matches. Many of these fires are caused by children younger than 5 years. Cigarette lighters are especially dangerous. Although butane cigarette lighters have to be made child-resistant, they are not childproof. Here are tips to help keep your children safe from injury.

- Never allow anyone to smoke while holding a child.
- Never leave a lit cigarette, cigar, or pipe inside or outside.
- Keep matches and lighters out of your children's reach.
- Remember that child-resistant doesn't mean childproof.

## Resources

For more information about tobacco use, read *Tobacco: Straight Talk for Teens and The Risks of Tobacco Use* from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Other resources include

### AAP Julius B. Richmond Center of Excellence

[www2.aap.org/richmondcenter/Parents\\_Families.html](http://www2.aap.org/richmondcenter/Parents_Families.html)

### Truth Initiative

[www.becomeanex.org](http://www.becomeanex.org)

### Smokefree.gov

800/QUIT-NOW (800/784-8669)

[www.smokefree.gov](http://www.smokefree.gov)

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[www.cdc.gov/tobacco/quit\\_smoking](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/quit_smoking)

### American Lung Association

800/LUNG-USA (800/586-4872)

[www.lung.org](http://www.lung.org)

### American Cancer Society

800/ACS-2345 (800/227-2345)

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

### American Heart Association

800/AHA-USA-1 (800/242-8721)

[www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)

### Surgeon General Report Consumer Booklet "Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults"

[www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data\\_statistics/sgr/2012/consumer\\_booklet/pdfs/consumer.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/sgr/2012/consumer_booklet/pdfs/consumer.pdf)

Listing of resources does not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of external resources. Information was current at the time of publication.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

## From your doctor

American Academy  
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is an organization of 66,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of all infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

American Academy of Pediatrics  
Web site—[www.HealthyChildren.org](http://www.HealthyChildren.org)

© 2010  
American Academy of Pediatrics, Updated 07/2016.  
All rights reserved.