



Passive Smoking

Unclouding the issue



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What is 'passive smoking'?

It's well known that people who smoke are at high risk of getting serious illnesses, like respiratory disease, heart disease and cancer.

But we know that non-smokers can also get these health problems due to breathing in tobacco smoke (and that they are much more likely to get these problems than those not breathing in tobacco smoke).

Do you regularly have to walk through a wall of smoke to get into a pub or restaurant due to a crowd smoking outside? Or do you live with a smoker? Or do you sit in a car with someone who smokes? Or are you ever a visitor to a house where people smoke?

If you can say 'yes' to any of these, then chances are you are breathing in other people's smoke, even if you can't actually see or smell the smoke. This is called passive smoking. And it can cause serious health problems.

Why am I at risk?

Many of the harmful substances in a cigarette are released into the air when smokers take a draw and then breathe out. Harmful substances are also released in the smoke coming from the burning cigarette tip. This mix of exhaled smoke and smoke from the burning cigarette is called second-hand smoke.

And a pretty horrible mix it is, too. Did you know, for instance, that second-hand smoke contains more than 4,000 chemicals, many of them known to cause cancer and other diseases?

What does passive smoking do to my health?

Second-hand smoke isn't just unpleasant. It does lots more than sting your eyes and nose, give you a sore throat or make you cough. If it gets into your lungs on a regular basis, it can really damage your health.

As a passive smoker, you have a greater chance of getting serious illnesses – the same ones smokers get.

That means your chances of having a heart attack, lung cancer and chest problems like asthma and bronchitis are far greater than they would be if you didn't breathe in second-hand smoke.

Recent research also suggests that second-hand smoke can trigger heart attacks in people with heart conditions after only short periods of exposure. Although the level of risk isn't yet known, it is advised that people at risk of coronary heart disease and those with known coronary artery disease should avoid smoky indoor environments where possible.

What about smoking in homes and in cars?

The smoking ban was brought in to protect people from exposure to second-hand smoke and therefore protect their health. This improves everyone's health, including that of smokers who smoke less when bans are in place.

However, people are still being exposed to second-hand smoke in homes and in cars. Cars are confined spaces and the risks associated with passive smoking are high – an open window doesn't provide enough protection against the chemicals found in second-hand smoke. These chemicals linger long after the smoke has disappeared, and can be absorbed by carpets, furnishings and walls in the home, increasing your risk of exposure.

What about my kids?

There are three main chemical products in cigarette smoke:

- nicotine
- tar
- carbon monoxide (CO)

Tar and carbon monoxide are the most dangerous, especially to children. Carbon monoxide binds to haemoglobin in the blood and means that blood carries less oxygen. Exposure to CO from cigarette smoke is associated with low birthweight in children as well as many of the health effects strongly linked with second-hand smoke.

Children are at risk because their bodies are young and still developing. Children who live with people who smoke – parents, guardians, brothers, sisters or family friends – are likely to be harmed by breathing second-hand smoke. As a result of illnesses strongly linked with second-hand smoke, they are off sick from school more often, and are more likely to be admitted to hospital. Remember that children are more likely to take up smoking if they see adults around them smoking.

Kids of school age can get chest conditions like pneumonia and asthma, have more coughs and colds, and develop nasty problems with their ears – ‘glue ear’ – which can even lead to partial deafness. All of these risks are higher among children exposed to second-hand smoke than those not exposed to second-hand smoke.

Babies can be even more severely affected with even higher risks to health. Worst of all, one of the most important causes of ‘cot death’ is when parents smoke regularly near their baby.

Passive smoking affects babies while they are still in their mother’s womb. If the mother breathes in second-hand smoke, the chemicals in the smoke make their way to her unborn baby – and that’s more likely to cause harm such as low birthweight and increased risks associated with it.

Can't the smoke just be sucked away by fans and extractors?

Fans, extractors and ventilators can help clear some of the smoke and make things feel a bit more comfortable. But they can't clear away all the damaging chemicals and so don't reduce the health risks associated with second-hand smoke.

So what can I do about second-hand smoke?

There's no point in stomping over to a smoker and demanding that he or she put their cigarette out – it just won't work. But here are some practical things you can do to protect your health and the health of your family.

- If a smoker comes to your house or gets a lift in your car, ask him or her not to smoke in your car or house, especially if you have children around, and explain the reasons why.
- Steer clear of places that allow smoking. That's not as hard as it sounds these days. As well as smoke-free public places, more and more smokers are making their homes and cars smoke-free.
- If you are in a public place (for example a bar, restaurant or hospital) where smoking occurs near the doorways, politely ask staff why they don't extend their smoking policy to include the grounds immediately outside the doorway.
- If someone asks 'do you mind if I light up?', don't make a fuss, but make it clear that you do mind and explain the reasons why.
- If someone is smoking where smoking is prohibited, ask the manager of the premises to point out that smoking is not allowed.

- If smoke from outside is affecting you at work, for example through open windows or near doorways, ask your boss, union rep or HR department to think about how the workplace smoking policy can be developed to include the grounds. Remember – your employer has a responsibility, by law, to do everything possible to look after your health at work.
- If you are pregnant ask people not to smoke around you or in your home and explain why.
- Ask people not to smoke around children and explain why.
- Encourage smokers to think about stopping.

Opening a window or airing out the smell of smoke does not protect you or anyone else from the harm of second-hand smoke. Making your home and car smoke-free is the only way to protect yourself and others, especially children, from second-hand smoke.

Further information is available from local health promotion departments and Smokeline:

- Passive smoking and health (factsheet)
- Passive smoking and the health of babies and children (factsheet)

For confidential help and advice on stopping smoking

- Call Smokeline on 0800 84 84 84 (noon-12am) or go to **www.canstopsmoking.com**. Both will give information about free, local, stop smoking services.