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FACT SHEET: Protect Your Family From Secondhand Smoke

WHAT IS SECONDHAND SMOKE?

Breathing the smoke from someone else's cigarettes is called passive smoking or secondhand smoke. Exposure to secondhand smoke can occur in the home, in the workplace, in social settings and in public places. More than 40 percent of children under 12 years of age live in a home with at least one smoker. Thirty-seven percent of nonsmoking adults live with someone who smokes or are exposed to smoke in the workplace.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH EFFECTS OF SECONDHAND SMOKE?

We have heard of the health problems smokers can experience, such as lung cancer and heart disease. However, breathing secondhand smoke also can cause cancer. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that secondhand smoke causes approximately 3,000 lung cancer deaths each year in nonsmoking adults.

It is less well-known that secondhand smoke can cause serious health problems for children exposed to it. Some of those health problems are:

- **An increased risk of bronchitis and pneumonia. Each year, it is estimated that 150,000 to 300,000 bronchitis and pneumonia cases in infants and young children are attributable to exposure to secondhand smoke. Of these, about half result in hospitalization.**

- **Chronic ear infections.**

- **Irritation of the upper respiratory tract (nose and throat) and slower lung development.**

- **More frequent asthma attacks and more severe symptoms among children with asthma. Between 200,000 and 1 million asthmatic children have their condition worsened by exposure to secondhand smoke.**

- **An increased risk for developing asthma among children who have not previously had asthma.**

- **Irritation of the eyes, nose and throat.**

- **Longer recovery time from colds and other illnesses.**

- **More days of school missed due to illness.**

The health risk to infants begins even before a baby is born. Pregnant smokers have more miscarriages and more premature births. The risk of having a low birth-weight infant is doubled, increasing both the risk of infant mortality and future health problems.

Among nonsmoking adults, the risk of lung cancer is roughly 30 percent higher for nonsmoking spouses of smokers than for nonsmoking spouses of nonsmokers. The effect of secondhand smoke on the heart may be of even greater concern. Exposure to smoke aggravates the condition of people with heart disease, and some studies have linked passive smoking with the development of heart disease.

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In a national study, more than 10,000 children and adults had blood tests that assessed exposure to nicotine (from cigarette smoke) from the previous two days. The tests indicated that 88 percent of nontobacco users had been exposed to nicotine during the previous two days. The more smokers there were in a household, the higher the level of exposure to nicotine among nonsmokers. Children with one or more parents who smoke had some of the highest levels of exposure to nicotine. Nonsmokers who indicated they were exposed to cigarette smoke at work had higher levels of exposure to nicotine than nonsmokers who were not exposed to smoke at work.

DOES SEPARATING SMOKERS FROM NONSMOKERS REDUCE THE RISK TO NONSMOKERS?

Cigarette smoke diffuses throughout the house or the work space and persists for long periods after smoking ends. Separating smokers and nonsmokers in the same room may reduce, but will not eliminate, nonsmokers' exposure to tobacco smoke. Locating smokers and nonsmokers in separate rooms that have the same ventilation system will not eliminate exposure to tobacco smoke for the nonsmokers. Attempts to remove tobacco smoke through ventilation or through the use of air cleaners are generally unsuccessful. The most effective ways to minimize exposure are: 1) to restrict smoking to areas that are separately ventilated (do not share the same heating/cooling system) and are directly exhausted to the outside, or 2) to eliminate smoking in the building entirely.

HOW CAN WE REDUCE OUR EXPOSURE TO SECONDHAND SMOKE?

A national study to assess attitudes about exposure to secondhand smoke indicated that the majority of people will choose nonsmoking seating in public places when given the choice. However, the only reliable way to reduce exposure to secondhand smoke is to ban smoking in the home, the workplace and other public places. The following practices will reduce exposure and reduce the health risks to family members:

- **Do not allow smoking in your home or in your car.**
- **Choose child-care providers and baby sitters who do not smoke around children.**
- **Do not expose children to smoking at social occasions, while conducting business, or in public places.**
- **Ask school administrators to ban smoking from school events.**
- **Ask 4-H leaders, scout leaders and others who teach children not to smoke when children are present.**
- **Ask employers to ban smoking inside the workplace.**
- **Choose nonsmoking sections at restaurants or choose restaurants that do not allow smoking.**
- **Minimize time spent in businesses that allow smoking.**
- **Minimize time spent indoors with friends who smoke.**

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