

frequently asked questions about second-hand smoke

What is second-hand smoke?

Second-hand smoke results from the "sidestream" smoke that comes from the burning tip of a cigarette and the "mainstream" smoke that is exhaled by the smoker. Second-hand smoking, passive smoking, involuntary smoking or exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) all refer to the phenomena of breathing other people's smoke.

What's in second-hand smoke?

Second-hand smoke is the smoke that individuals breathe when they are located in the same air space as smokers. Second-hand smoke is a mixture of exhaled mainstream smoke from the tobacco user, sidestream smoke emitted from the smoldering tobacco between puffs, contaminants emitted into the air during the puff, and contaminants that diffuse through the cigarette paper and mouth end between puffs.¹ It is a complex combination of over 4000 chemicals in the form of particles and gases. It includes irritants and systemic poisons such as hydrogen cyanide, sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, ammonia, and formaldehyde. It also contains carcinogens and mutagens such as arsenic, chromium, nitrosamines, and benzo(a)pyrene. Many of the chemicals, such as nicotine, cadmium and carbon monoxide, damage reproductive processes. Second-hand smoke is a major indoor air pollutant. It has been classified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency as a "class A" or human carcinogen for which there is no safe level of exposure.

How does second-hand smoke affect health?

Non-smokers who breathe second-hand smoke suffer many of the same diseases as regular smokers. Heart disease deaths as well as lung and nasal sinus cancers have been causally associated with second-hand smoke exposure. Second-hand smoke also causes a wide variety of adverse health effects in children including bronchitis and pneumonia, development and exacerbation of asthma, middle ear infections, and "glue ear", which is the most common cause of deafness in children. Exposure of non-smoking women to second-hand smoke during pregnancy reduces fetal growth, and postnatal exposure of infants to second-hand smoke greatly increases the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Tobacco smoke also causes immediate effects such as eye and nasal irritation, headache, sore throat, dizziness, nausea, cough, and respiratory problems.

What is the extent of the problem of second-hand smoke?

Exposure to second-hand smoke is a widespread problem that affects people from all cultures and countries. This exposure occurs throughout ordinary situation in daily life: in homes, at work and school, on playgrounds and public transport, in restaurants and bars--literally everywhere people go.

Surveys conducted around the world confirm widespread exposure. One survey estimated that 79 % of Europeans over age 15 were exposed to second-hand smoke. Another estimated that 88% of all non-smokers in the United States were exposed to second-hand smoke. Recent data from South Africa shows that 64 % of children below age five in Soweto live with at least one smoker in the house. The Cancer Society of New Zealand reports that second-hand smoke is the third largest killer in the country, after active smoking and alcohol use.

Are well-ventilated non-smoking sections the answer?

No. Although good ventilation can help reduce the irritability of smoke, it does not eliminate its poisonous components. When smoking sections share ventilation with non-smoking areas, the smoke is dispersed everywhere. Smoking sections only help protect non-smokers when they are completely enclosed, have a separate ventilation system that goes directly outdoors without re-circulating air in the building, and when employees are not required to pass through them.

¹ Environmental Protection Agency. Respiratory health effects of passive smoking: Lung cancer and other disorders. Washington, D.C.: Office of Health and Environmental Assessment, 1992.



So how can we protect people from second-hand smoke?

Governments can regulate and legislate smoking bans in public places, educate people about the dangers of second-hand smoke, and provide support for those who wish to quit smoking. Employers can initiate and enforce smoking bans in workplaces. Parents can stop smoking in the house and car, particularly around children, and ask others to do the same. They can also ensure that their children's day-care, school and after-school programs are smoke-free. Individuals can let their family, friends and co-workers know that they do mind if they smoke near them.

Work with your local organizations to initiate actions on second-hand smoke.

Are smoking restrictions hard to enforce?

Most of the public -- even smokers -- support smoke-free spaces. Smoking bans in workplaces and public places work when people are aware of them. The public should know in advance that smoking bans are being implemented, and they should know the health reasons for smoking bans. Good education and advance planning lead to self-enforcement and success of smoking restrictions.

Do smoking restrictions hurt business?

No. Most employers who go smoke-free save money by increasing productivity, lowering maintenance and cleaning costs, and lowering insurance coverage. Studies of sales receipts from restaurants and bars in the US before and after smoking bans have found that sales usually stay the same or go up after a smoking ban.

...then why are smoke-free places so rare?

The tobacco industry spends millions to fund misinformation campaign on second-hand smoke. Scientists and consultants have been hired to not only confuse the public about the validity of scientific data, but to also create doubt about the researchers who produce the data and about the science itself. In addition to attacking legitimate studies, bogus research projects that downplay the seriousness of second-hand smoke are funded and promoted.

Tobacco lobbyists and lawyers deflect government regulation of second-hand smoke, and this has been supplemented, aided by huge tobacco contributions to political campaigns. When money and misinformation don't work, the industry promotes false solutions to control second-hand smoke.

Although evidence shows that ventilation is *not* an effective solution to the problem of second-hand smoke, the industry continues to push for this option, even forming indoor air consulting "front groups" who downplay the risks of second-hand smoke.

A campaign to promote "courtesy of choice" as an alternative to banning smoking in public places has been launched worldwide. This implies that the serious problem of second-hand smoke can be solved merely by smokers asking for permission before they light up, or by having separate smoking and non-smoking sections. Second-hand smoke is thus portrayed as a mere annoyance for non-smokers, rather than as a health issue. The industry also funds smokers rights' movements to create so-called independent opposition to smoking bans. People concerned about second-hand smoke are then branded as zealots.

Fortunately, tobacco industry opposition to clean air can be defeated. Your actions will make a difference. Become a leader in your workplace, your organization, your community, and your home. Speak up for clean air and make your voice heard! Let's clear the air.

