

# Health Tips

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## Health Tip: The Dangers of Secondhand Smoke

Smoke that is exhaled by a smoker or smoke that comes from the end of a lighted cigarette, pipe, or cigar is known as secondhand smoke. When non-smokers breathe in secondhand smoke it is called passive or involuntary smoking. The obvious problem with this is that through involuntary smoking, the non-smoker is exposed to the same toxins and chemicals as smokers. There are at least 250 toxic chemicals including arsenic, benzene, cadmium, polonium-210 (a radioactive chemical) and vinyl chloride in secondhand smoke. Over 50 of these chemicals have been associated with causing cancer.

### What harm does secondhand smoke do?

According to the American Cancer Society, each year in the United States secondhand smoke exposure causes:

- an estimated 46,000 deaths from heart disease in non-smokers who live with smokers
- about 3,400 lung cancer deaths in non-smoking adults
- other breathing problems in non-smokers, including coughing, mucus, chest discomfort, and reduced lung function



The Surgeon General estimates that nonsmokers who are exposed to secondhand smoke at home or work increase their heart disease and lung cancer risk by up to 30 percent.

**Secondhand smoke and children.** Passive smoking seems to be particularly harmful to children. Statistics indicate that secondhand smoke is responsible for:

- 150,000 to 300,000 lung infections (such as pneumonia and bronchitis) in children younger than 18 months of age, which result in 7,500 to 15,000 hospitalizations annually
- an increase in the number and severity of asthma attacks in children who have asthma
- more than 750,000 middle ear infections in children

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- an increased risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) in babies whose mothers smoke while they are pregnant or who are exposed to secondhand smoke.

Despite these concerns, more than 126 million nonsmoking Americans, both children and adults, continue to be exposed to secondhand smoke in their homes and workplaces.

**What can be done to protect yourself and your family?** Since there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke, the only way to be fully protected is to completely avoid exposure. In the case of indoor spaces, this means completely eliminating indoor smoking. Separate spaces, air cleaners, and ventilation systems do not prevent exposure to secondhand smoke. Fortunately, over the past few years, many state and local governments have passed laws prohibiting smoking in public places such as hospitals, airports and restaurants. Federal laws banning smoking on domestic airlines have also prevented millions from being harmed by passive smoking.

The following are ways that you can protect yourself and your family from the dangers of secondhand smoke:

- Ask people to not smoke in your home. They should go outside to smoke. This is particularly true of baby-sitters or others who may care for your children.
- Ask your employer to create a smoke-free policy for the workplace.
- Do not allow anyone to smoke in your car.
- Make sure that the places that you or your family spends time in (restaurants, schools, day care, etc.) are smoke-free.
- Be sure that your children are aware of the dangers of passive smoking and instruct them to stay away from secondhand smoke.



In recent months, the news media has publicized widely the potential threat of a swine flu pandemic. Granted, swine flu has the potential for causing widespread illness, but the well known and ongoing threat of secondhand smoke seems to receive less attention than it deserves. Any exposure that causes 46,000 deaths from heart disease and 3,400 deaths from cancer each year in this country alone warrants serious consideration. Particularly when cigarette smoking is a habit that can (and should) be avoided completely.

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