

The Dangers of 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. Any time children breathe in secondhand smoke they are exposed to these chemicals.

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)

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.

For more information, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics Julius B. Richmond Center Web site at www.richmondcenter.org.