

Protecting your Family from Second-hand Smoke

Despite the known health hazards of smoking and second-hand smoke, one in five British Columbians allow smoking inside their home. It is likely that this same number of people may be smoking in their cars when children and others are present.

This BC HealthFile explores just how harmful second-hand smoke is, especially to children, and why it is so important to make your home and car smoke-free.

What is second-hand smoke and how dangerous is it?

Second-hand smoke is a mix of smoke from the burning end of a lit cigarette, pipe or cigar plus the smoke blown into the air by the person smoking.

Second-hand smoke is poisonous and has over 4000 chemicals, including 50 that are known to cause cancer. Breathing second-hand smoke can be more dangerous than inhaling smoke through a filtered cigarette. It has twice as much nicotine and tar as the smoke that a person smoking inhales and has five times more carbon monoxide, a deadly gas that starves your body of oxygen.

Each year in Canada, breathing second-hand smoke causes more than 1000 deaths among people who do not smoke, mainly from lung cancer and heart disease, and keeps thousands more from leading healthy lives.

What can you do to protect your family and friends?

- Make your home and car smoke-free and encourage your family and friends to do the same.

- If family or friends want to smoke, ask them to smoke outside, away from open windows or doors.
- Do not allow smoking near your children including at daycares, schools and sporting events.
- Visit only smoke-free places, restaurants and homes.

Is your family protected if you smoke in another room, or open windows or use air filters?

Smoking in another room or opening a window will not protect your family from second-hand smoke. Many of the toxic chemicals remain in the air after the cigarette is out, and cling to carpets, curtains, furniture and clothes. In fact, second-hand smoke can remain in the home even if smoking took place days, weeks and months earlier.

Air filters, purifiers and ventilation systems do not remove all the chemicals in second-hand smoke. They may remove some of the smell and particles from the air, but they may not remove the harmful toxins that you cannot see or smell.

Smoking outside protects your family only if the smoke does not drift back into the house through open windows or doors.

What about smoking in cars?

Smoking in cars when children are present is especially harmful to their health. This is because smoking in a small space like a car is 23 times more toxic than in a house.

A person who smokes in a car can raise the carbon monoxide levels by the third cigarette, causing the body to have less oxygen.

This can damage the heart, brain and muscles. Even opening a window may not protect children or others because it can change the airflow in the car causing the smoke to be blown directly back at them.

How does second-hand smoke harm infants and children?

Second-hand smoke is a major cause of childhood illness. Many parents are not aware of how harmful it is to allow smoking around their children.

Babies exposed to second-hand smoke are more likely to die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), also known as crib death.

Second-hand smoke is dangerous for everyone, but children are more at risk:

- Their lungs are smaller and their immune systems, which protect them from getting sick, are less developed.
- They breathe faster than adults and breathe in more harmful chemicals.
- They have less control over their environment and have less ability to complain.
- Second-hand smoke can affect children's behaviour and their ability to understand and reason. Studies have shown that children who are regularly exposed to second-hand smoke score lower on tests in reading, math, logic and reasoning skills.

Children and infants who live in homes where one or more family members smoke have a greater risk of:

- Ear infections;
- Lung infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia;
- Breathing problems; and
- Chronic coughing and wheezing.

Children who already have asthma suffer more and severe asthma attacks, and even small amounts of smoke can make their condition worse. Children who do not have asthma are more likely to get asthma when exposed to second-hand smoke.

Children with parents who smoke are almost twice as likely to start smoking than children whose parents do not smoke.

For more information:

For more information visit the following Web sites:

www.gosmokefree.ca

www.tobaccofacts.org

www.smoke-free.ca

www.oma.org

If you are thinking of quitting, call QuitNow toll-free in BC at 1-877-455-2233 or visit www.quitnow.ca.

For more BC HealthFile topics visit www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm, or visit your local public health unit.

Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

Visit BC HealthGuide OnLine – a world of health information you can trust at www.bchealthguide.org