

Environmental Tobacco Smoke: A Danger to Children



Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. It causes almost 20% of all the deaths in this country each year. People who are around smokers can't help breathing in the smoke that comes from cigarettes, pipes, or cigars. Researchers have now found that breathing in someone else's smoke is very dangerous, especially for children. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers parents the followings information to help them create a "tobacco-free environment" for their children.

What is Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS)?

Environmental Tobacco Smoke, or ETS, is the smoke that is breathed out by a smoker. ETS also includes the smoke that comes from the tip of a burning cigarette. Exposure to ETS happens any time someone breathes in the smoke that comes from a cigarette, pipe, or cigar. ETS contains many dangerous chemicals that have been proven to cause cancer. It is estimated that ETS causes 3,000 lung cancer deaths each year to people who don't even smoke!

ETS and children

ETS has almost 4,000 chemicals in it that infants and children breathe in whenever someone smokes around them. Children who breathe in ETS are at risk for many serious health problems.

When a mother smokes during pregnancy, she has a higher risk of having a premature baby or a baby who is not fully developed. When a mother smokes during her pregnancy or around her newborn, the infant has a higher risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Children who breathe in someone else's cigarette smoke (especially children under 2 years of age) have a higher risk of getting other serious medical problems or making them worse, including the following:

- Ear infections and hearing problems
- Upper respiratory infections
- Respiratory problems such as bronchitis and pneumonia
- Asthma

Children of smokers also cough and wheeze more and have a harder time getting over colds. In addition, ETS can cause a stuffy nose, headaches, sore throat, eye irritation, hoarseness, dizziness, nausea, loss of appetite, lack of energy, or fussiness.

Children with asthma are especially sensitive to ETS. ETS can actually increase the number and severity of asthma attacks, which may require trips to the hospital. Also, exposure to the smoke of as few as 10 cigarettes per day raises a child's chances of getting asthma even if that child has never had any symptoms.

In addition, ETS can cause problems for children later in life including:

- lung cancer
- Heart disease
- Cataracts (eye disease)

With all of these dangers, it's easy to understand why children should not be exposed to ETS.

Inhaling the smoke from the cigarettes of others is dangerous for pregnant women, too. Pregnant women should stay away from smoking areas and ask smokers not to smoke around them.

Smoking During Pregnancy

When a woman smokes during her pregnancy, her unborn child is exposed to the chemicals in the smoke. This can be very harmful to the child and can lead to many serious health problems including:

- Miscarriage
- Prematurity (having a baby that is not fully developed)
- Low birth weight - therefore a less healthy baby
- Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)
- Some childhood cancers

These risks go up the longer a mother smokes and the more cigarettes she smokes during her pregnancy. Quitting anytime during the pregnancy will help—of course, the sooner the better.

How parents can protect their children from ETS

If you are a smoker—quit! It's one of the most important things you can do for the health of your children and the best way to prevent your child from being exposed to ETS. If you are having trouble quitting smoking, ask your doctor for help. Also, contact your local chapter of the American Lung Association, American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, or other groups that sponsor stop-smoking classes.

As a parent, you are a role model. Children watch what their parents do. If your child sees you smoking, he or she may want to try smoking and grow up to become a smoker as well. Cigarette smoking by children and adolescents causes the same health problems that affect adults.

Tobacco-free environments for children

Parents need to be aware of the many places where their children can be exposed to ETS. Even if there are no smokers in your home, your children can still be exposed to ETS in other places, including:

- In the car or on a bus
- In a restaurant
- At a friend's or relative's house
- At the mall
- At the babysitter's house
- At sports events or pop music concerts

How do you avoid being around smokers? One way is to ask people not to smoke around your children or remove your child from places where there are smokers. The following tips may help you keep your children from being exposed to ETS:

- Don't let people smoke in your house. Don't put out any ashtrays—this will discourage people from lighting up. Remember, air flows throughout a house, so smoking in even one room allows smoke to go everywhere.
- Don't let people smoke in your car. Opening windows is not enough to clear the air.
- Choose a babysitter who doesn't allow smoking in the house.
- Avoid crowded, smoky restaurants when you are with your child.
- When you are with your child in public places—shopping malls, restaurants, bowling alleys—sit in “nonsmoking” sections.
- Help get your child's school to be smoke-free. Get your children involved in this effort as well.

Almost 50% of the homes in the United States have at least one smoker living there. This means that millions of children in the United States are breathing in ETS in their own homes. If you smoke around your child or allow your child to be exposed to ETS in other places, you may be putting him or her into more danger than you realize.

Parents need to make every effort to keep their children away from smokers and ETS. Parents who smoke should think about quitting, not just for their own sake, but for the health of their children.

For additional information for parents and teens on tobacco use, see the following handouts by the American Academy of Pediatrics:

Smoking: Straight Talk for Teens and

Tobacco Use: A Message to Parents and Teens.

Smoking and Children—A Fire Hazard

In addition to the dangers of ETS, smoking around children can also pose fire and burn dangers. Children can get burned if they play with lit cigarettes, cigars, or with lighters or matches. Keep the following guidelines in mind to keep your child safe from injury:

- Never smoke while you are holding your baby.
- Never leave a lit cigarette, cigar, or pipe unattended.
- Keep matches and lighters out of your child's reach.

Cigarette lighters are especially dangerous. Cigarette lighters can be found in almost 30 million homes in the United States. Each year children under 5 years old playing with lighters cause more than 5,000 home fires resulting in about 150 deaths and more than 1,000 injuries. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) now requires that butane cigarette lighters be made child-resistant. This new rule will prevent hundreds of deaths and fire-related injuries to children each year. But remember, lighters can be made child-resistant, not childproof. It is still very important to keep lighters and matches away from children.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 57,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

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