

Secondhand smoke affects most apartment residents

December 17 2012, by Wendy Koch And Liz Szabo

Nearly 29 million Americans who say they don't smoke in their apartments may still be exposed to secondhand smoke that wafts in from elsewhere in the building, federal researchers report Friday.

Secondhand smoke can cause disease and [premature death](#) in non-smokers; it potentially affects about 44 million Americans who live in multi-unit housing each year, including 27.6 million to 28.9 million with smoke-free apartments or condos, according to the study by researchers at the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

"It's a big deal. ... There's air seepage between one unit and another," through insulation, cracks and power outlets, says Tim McAfee, director of CDC's Office on Smoking and Health. He says even the finest ventilation systems don't protect apartment dwellers, who are "involuntary exposed to secondhand smoke."

Many aren't aware of it, he says, and if they are, the extent may be "significant," he says, adding building-wide [smoking bans](#) are the only real solution.

While the number of smoke-free laws nationwide has surged in the last decade, most apply to [public spaces](#) such as workplaces, restaurants, bars and parks. Very few cover multi-unit housing.

Yet more landlords and public housing authorities are adopting smoke-free policies to lower fire risks and cleaning costs as well as to meet

consumer demand. Surveys show most Americans, 80 percent of whom don't smoke, favor smoke-free housing, but some condo owners have objected to their buildings' adopting smoking bans after they bought their property.

The study, published in the peer-reviewed [Nicotine](#) & Tobacco Research journal, says Census data taken between 2006 and 2009 indicate that one-quarter of Americans - or 79.2 million - live in multi-unit housing and about 62.7 million of them don't smoke in their apartments. That means 16.5 million do.

The CDC researchers combine that data with the findings of two prior peer-reviewed studies, conducted from 2007 through 2010, that found 44 percent to 46.2 percent of apartment dwellers said they were exposed to secondhand smoke in their living space during the last year.

This is the first research to estimate how many Americans are at risk from secondhand smoke because they live in apartments, says Tom Glynn, director of cancer science and trends at the American Cancer Society. He notes that one-third of them, about 26 million, are either children or seniors over 65 - two groups especially likely to become sick from secondhand smoke.

"We already know that more than 43,000 nonsmokers in the USA die every year - primarily from lung cancer and heart disease - due to their exposure to secondhand smoke," Glynn says, adding such exposure also sickens millions of people by causing bronchitis and ear infections.

The CDC authors, led by Brian King, caution that their findings have limits, noting the data used are the most recent available on the topic but are still several years old. They say more Americans may now live in apartment buildings that ban smoking. McAfee says he expects such bans, now relatively rare, will gain popularity.

A CDC study released last month found that ventilation at five major U.S. airports with designated smoking areas does not protect passengers from [secondhand smoke](#). It found that pollution levels near (within a meter or 39 inches) smoking areas are five times higher than levels at airports that entirely ban smoking. Levels inside smoking areas, including bars and restaurants, were 23 times higher than at smoke-free airports.

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