

The Medical Minute: How smoking harms kids

November 7 2011, By Adam Spanier

Everyone knows that smoking is harmful to your health. However, smoke exposure (secondhand smoke) also can be harmful. Cigarette smoke has more than 4,000 chemicals in it, and more than 50 of these chemicals are known to cause cancer. Children are at greater risk from these exposures than adults because they breathe more frequently than adults and their bodies are still developing.

Studies from around the globe have uncovered new risks -- both physical and mental -- to [children](#) who are exposed to [secondhand smoke](#). The latest research has found that children exposed to secondhand smoke are more prone to these problems:

-- Being overweight: A long-term study in Hong Kong found children whose fathers smoke daily are more likely to be overweight, even if their mothers didn't smoke. Previous studies had linked a mother's smoking during pregnancy to an increased risk for unhealthy weight.

-- Infections: A related study found that babies exposed to secondhand smoke during their first six months are 45 percent more likely to be hospitalized for an infectious disease by their eighth birthday. Earlier studies had uncovered a greater risk for respiratory infections and ear infections among children younger than 6 who are regularly exposed to secondhand smoke.

-- Lung development: [Smoke exposure](#) during pregnancy and childhood has been shown to impair lung development, leading to lifelong deficits

in lung function.

-- Heart disease: Secondhand smoke can harm the inner lining of blood vessels in toddlers, according to a U.S. study of children ages 2 to 5 and 9 to 14. A study in Finland found that children ages 8 to 13 exposed to secondhand smoke showed thickening of the arteries. Both problems are early stages of heart disease.

-- Psychiatric problems: When women smoke while pregnant, a Finnish study found, the rate of psychiatric illnesses among their children is at least 50 percent higher than the rate among nonsmokers' children. Substance abuse, behavioral problems and emotional disorders were especially common.

-- ADHD: Recent national studies have demonstrated that children exposed to tobacco prenatally have 2.5 times the odds of developing attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

-- Lower test scores: Teens with parents who smoke are more likely to fail standardized tests than those in smoke-free homes, according to researchers at Temple University in Philadelphia.

How can you make sure secondhand smoke in the home doesn't affect your children? The only way is to quit; even smoking only outside is not enough. As the American Cancer Society's 36th Great American Smokeout (Nov. 17) approaches, here are some tips to help you stop smoking:

-- Write down the reasons you want to quit.

-- Get rid of all cigarettes, ashtrays, and other aids to smoking.

-- Keep your hands busy with activities such as knitting, sewing, or doing

puzzles.

- Socialize with nonsmokers.
- Change habits tied to smoking. Does drinking alcohol or coffee make you want to light up? Limit or avoid these activities.
- Practice stress-reducing tricks such as deep breathing, meditation or exercise.
- Call 800-QUIT-NOW, a government-sponsored tobacco-cessation service, or look into Penn State Hershey's Smoking Cessation Program by calling 800-243-1455.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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