

# Second-hand smoking and your health

## What is second-hand smoking?

Second-hand smoking is breathing in other people's tobacco smoke, either from the burning end of a cigarette or from the smoke breathed out by a smoker. There are over 4,000 chemicals present in cigarette smoke, and many are known carcinogens (substances that are known to cause cancer).

Second-hand smoking is sometimes referred to as 'exposure to environmental tobacco smoke' or 'passive smoking'. It affects people who don't smoke, as well as people who do.

The amount of smoke that you breathe in from passive smoking depends on:

- how many people are smoking and how near they are to you
- the size, shape and ventilation of the area that you are in
- how long you are exposed to the tobacco smoke.

## What are the risks of second-hand smoking?

Smokers aren't the only people who are at risk from their smoking. There is evidence that second-hand smoking at home, at work and in enclosed public places can harm adults and children.<sup>1</sup>

- A non-smoker's risk of heart disease can increase by up to 25–30% if they are exposed to second-hand smoke.<sup>2,3</sup> British research suggests that the effect may be even greater, with one study reporting the increased risk of heart disease as high as 50–60%.<sup>4</sup>
- The risk of heart disease for men and women increases with the amount<sup>5</sup> of second-hand smoke that they are exposed to and/or number of years that they are exposed to it.<sup>6</sup>
- There is growing evidence that non-smokers who are exposed to second-hand smoke have an increased risk of stroke.<sup>7,8</sup>
- Even very short-term exposure to second-hand smoke (as little as 30 minutes) can harm your body's cardiovascular system.<sup>9,10</sup>
- People who already have heart disease or have a higher risk of heart disease should take particular care to avoid being exposed to second-hand smoke because it can cause more immediate risks to their health.<sup>10</sup>

### How does second-hand smoking affect my health?

Tobacco smoke is absorbed quickly from your lungs into your bloodstream. The damage caused by second-hand smoking is similar to that caused by actually smoking.

Tobacco smoke:

- makes your blood 'stickier' and causes blood cells to clump together – this slows the blood flow and makes blockages in the bloodstream more likely
- slows the blood flow, making blockages more common
- helps to start (and speed up) the artery clogging process
- damages the lining of the arteries where clots can form – this starts happening even in healthy young adults.<sup>11</sup>

## Other health problems caused by second-hand smoking

Tobacco smoke can irritate the eyes, nose and throat of non-smokers. Second-hand smoke can also cause respiratory tract irritation, an increased risk of bronchitis and pneumonia, and increase the frequency and severity of asthma symptoms.<sup>1,12</sup>

Second-hand smoke is especially risky for children and babies.<sup>1,12</sup> It is associated with:

- low birth weight babies
- sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) – where babies suddenly stop breathing during sleep
- bronchitis and pneumonia
- middle ear infections
- the onset of asthma or increased frequency and severity of asthma attacks.

## What can I do to protect myself, my family and friends?

As noted by the US Surgeon General, exposure to second-hand smoke is a common public health hazard that is completely preventable.<sup>13</sup>

Everyone in Australia should be able to go about their daily lives without exposure to other people's cigarette smoke. Therefore, all workplaces, homes, cars, enclosed indoor public places and outdoor restricted public places, such as sporting venues, should be smoke-free.

### In your home and car

- If you smoke, smoke your cigarettes outside. Blowing smoke away from people, going into another room to smoke or opening a window will not protect family and friends from the dangers of second-hand smoking.
- If you don't smoke but family members do, be sympathetic and understanding but encourage them to quit. If they must smoke, ask them to smoke outside.
- If visitors to your home want to smoke, politely remind them not to smoke inside. Most smokers respect this and are happy to smoke outside. Display a smoke-free sticker on your front door if you feel uncomfortable asking a visitor to smoke outside.



- Don't smoke in your car or allow others to do so. Children and babies have no choice about exposure to second-hand smoke in confined spaces and it damages their health. If you need to smoke on a long car trip, make regular stops to smoke outside the car.
- Be a good role model for your children: don't smoke. Children whose parents don't smoke are much less likely to take up smoking.<sup>14,15,16</sup>

### In public places

- Know the law. Food preparation areas, public transport, elevators, airports and aircraft, theatres, schools, childcare centres and cinemas in Australia are all smoke-free. All states and one territory have introduced legislation for smoke-free workplaces and public places, including restaurants, hotels and nightclubs.
- Research shows that the health risks of second-hand smoking cannot be adequately reduced by ventilation or air cleaning, or by providing separate smoking and non-smoking areas.<sup>17,18</sup> Recent studies in the USA report that hospital admissions for heart attack decreased after comprehensive smoke-free policies were introduced in workplaces and public places.<sup>19</sup>
- If you go to a public venue that is not smoke-free or where smoke-free policies are ignored, contact the manager. Remember that the majority of Australians do not smoke. You are entitled to breathe clean air and avoid exposure to health risks in a public place.

### At work

- If your workplace is not smoke-free, talk with your employer about it. Occupational health and safety legislation requires employers in Australia to take all practicable measures to protect the health, safety and welfare of employees and others in the workplace. This applies to passive smoking. Smoke-free workplaces not only protect people from exposure to second-hand smoke, but there is also evidence that they encourage some smokers to quit and others to reduce the number of cigarettes they smoke each day.<sup>20,21</sup>

## Keep up the good work

Australia has been successful in reducing the prevalence of smoking in recent years, but much more needs to be done. We encourage you to be active in further reducing your exposure to second-hand smoke, and in supporting everyone's right to breathe smoke-free air.

Australia is highly regarded internationally for its progress in reducing exposure to second-hand smoke, but more can be done. With your help, a smoke-free Australia is an achievable goal.

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