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Secondhand Smoke and Children Fact Sheet

Secondhand smoke is a mixture of the smoke given off by the burning end of a cigarette, pipe or cigar and the smoke exhaled from the lungs of smokers. Secondhand smoke contains more than 250 chemicals known to be toxic or cancer causing, including formaldehyde, benzene, vinyl chloride, arsenic, ammonia, and hydrogen cyanide.¹

- Infants and young children are especially susceptible: their lungs are still developing and childhood exposure to secondhand smoke results in decreased lung function.² Children who breathe secondhand smoke are more likely to suffer from cough, wheeze, phlegm and breathlessness.³
- In children, exposure to secondhand smoke exacerbates 400,000-1,000,000 cases of asthma in the United States. New evidence suggest that secondhand smoke is a risk factor for induction of new cases of asthma among children and adolescents.⁴
- The current Surgeon Generals Report states that there is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure. Even brief exposures can be harmful to children.⁵
- In the U.S., 32 percent of middle school children and 28 percent of high school children are exposed to secondhand smoke in their own homes.⁶ Based on levels of cotinine (a biological marker of secondhand smoke exposure), an estimated 22 million children aged 3-11 and 18 million youth aged 12-19, were exposed to secondhand smoke in the U.S. in 2000.⁷
- Exposure to secondhand smoke causes 150,000 to 300,000 acute lower respiratory tract infections (pneumonia and bronchitis) annually in children 18 months and younger; these infections result in 7,500 to 15,000 hospitalizations each year.⁸
- Secondhand smoke exposure causes buildup of fluid in the middle ear, resulting in 790,000 to 1.6 million physician office visits.⁹ Middle ear infections are the most common cause of childhood operations and of childhood hearing loss.¹⁰
- A California EPA study estimated 430 sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) deaths annually associated with secondhand smoke exposure.¹¹
- Babies whose mothers smoke while pregnant or who are exposed to secondhand smoke after birth have weaker lungs than other babies, which increases the risk of many other health problems.¹²

Sources:

1. The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke: Children are Hurt by Secondhand Smoke. A Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006; Available at:

<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/secondhandsmoke/factsheets/factsheet2.html>. Accessed on 7/7/06.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. California Environmental Protection Agency. Health Effects of Exposure to ETS. June 2005.

5. The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke: Children are Hurt by Secondhand Smoke. A Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006; Available at:

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6. National Youth Tobacco Survey, 2000

7. The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke: Children are Hurt by Secondhand Smoke. A Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006; Available at:

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8. California Environmental Protection Agency. Health Effects of Exposure to ETS. June 2005.

9. California Environmental Protection Agency. Health Effects of Exposure to ETS. September 1997.

10. California Environmental Protection Agency. Health Effects of Exposure to ETS. June 2005.

11. Ibid.

12. The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke: Children are Hurt by Secondhand Smoke. A Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006; Available at:

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