

Second-hand smoke (SHS)

What is second-hand smoke?

Second-hand smoke (also called environmental tobacco smoke or passive smoking) is made up of

- mainstream smoke, the smoke that is exhaled by the smoker
- sidestream smoke, the smoke that comes from the burning end of a cigarette, pipe or cigar

Can SHS harm my health?

Yes it can. Second-hand smoke is composed of poisonous gases, liquids and particles that are harmful to your health. Some argue that smoking is a personal choice. But research clearly shows that smoking also poses a real health threat to non-smokers who are exposed to SHS at work, at home and elsewhere.

Every year about 3,400 Albertans die from tobacco-related diseases. People who are exposed to second-hand smoke are at risk for developing

- lung cancer
- heart disease
- leukemia

- lymphoma
- breathing problems
- irritation of the eyes, lungs and throat

Why is SHS harmful?

More than half of the smoke from a burning cigarette is not inhaled by the smoker. Instead this smoke enters into the surrounding environment. This sidestream smoke is inhaled by everyone (including the smoker) in the area. Sidestream smoke has twice as much nicotine and tar as the smoke that smokers inhale. It also has five times the carbon monoxide – a toxic gas that decreases the amount of oxygen in our blood.

There are 4,000 chemicals in second-hand smoke – 50 of them are known to cause cancer. Some of the cancer-causing chemicals in SHS have no known safe level of exposure. Small amounts of cancer-causing chemicals have been found in the blood, urine, saliva and breast milk of non-smokers, even after limited exposure to second-hand smoke. The risk to non-smokers from SHS doesn't end when the cigarette is put out. Second-hand smoke remains in the environment (clothes, carpets, draperies, air) and is still toxic.

Second-hand smoke and children

Every day, children are forced to inhale second-hand smoke in their homes, in family cars and in public places. This can be very bad for their health. A 1992 study reported that in a one-year period, the children of smoking parents inhale

the same amount of nicotine as if they themselves had smoked 60 to 150 cigarettes. Children who breathe second-hand smoke are at risk for

- bronchitis
- pneumonia
- asthma
- middle ear disease
- tonsillitis

Babies are also more likely to die of sudden infant death syndrome (also called SIDS or crib death) if other people in the house smoke – even if the mother doesn't. If a woman smokes while pregnant, the risk for SIDS will be two to three times higher.

Unborn babies are also at risk from second-hand smoke:

- Nicotine can be found in the blood of pregnant women who are exposed to second-hand smoke.
- Second-hand smoke can keep an unborn baby's lungs from growing and developing properly.
- Second-hand smoke can also cause stillbirths and miscarriages.
- Women who smoke usually have smaller babies. Growth is slowed because the carbon monoxide from the second-hand smoke lowers the unborn baby's supply of oxygen. Low-birth-weight babies have higher risks of illness, disability and death.

What can I do about SHS?

A recent survey revealed that over two-thirds of Albertans are concerned about the impact of second-hand smoke

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on their health. The good news? You can protect yourself and your family from the effects of second-hand smoke.

Here's what you can do:

- Declare your home and personal spaces (e.g., your car) to be smoke-free.
- If family members or visitors to your home must smoke, ask them to smoke outside. When visiting with friends or family who smoke, meet at spaces in the community that are smoke-free.
- If you are a parent, find out if your child's school is a smoke-free zone. If it isn't, work with school officials to make it one. Choose smoke-free child care providers.
- Talk to the people you work with about the risks of second-hand smoke. If you are an employer, develop a smoke-free policy at work. Limit smoking to an enclosed space, where the smoke is vented directly to the outdoors. Or ban smoking indoors altogether. This last is the cheapest, most effective solution.
- Encourage family members and friends who smoke to stop. You can't force others to quit smoking, but you can help and support them if they decide to quit.
- If you're a smoker concerned about second-hand smoke and interested in quitting, call the AADAC toll-free Smokers' Help Line at 1-866-33AADAC (1-866-332-2322). The Smokers' Help Line provides confidential and free information, referrals, telephone counselling and support to smokers who want to quit. The line is an important part of the Alberta Tobacco Reduction Strategy. The Smokers' Help Line is available 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.

- If you're a smoker looking for support to help you quit, you can find it online at albertaquits.ca. This free service offers information, professional support and access to a friendly community of people who want to help each other quit smoking.
- Are you a smoker concerned about second-hand smoke but not yet ready to quit smoking? You can protect other people from the effects of second-hand smoking by smoking outside in areas away from intake vents and away from children.
- As a member of your community, contact your local and provincial government. Ask them to pass laws to ban smoking from schools, restaurants, public transportation and other public places.

Want to know more?

For more information, contact your local AADAC office, call 1-866-33AADAC or visit our website at aadac.com