Protecting your children from secondhand smoke is one of the most important things you can do for their health.

What is secondhand smoke?

Secondhand smoke is a mixture of two types of smoke. One is the smoke exhaled by a smoker. The other is the smoke from the lighted end of a cigarette, pipe, or cigar.

Facts about secondhand smoke

- Secondhand smoke contains more than 7,000 chemicals. At least 250 of them are known to damage health.
- The dangerous particles in secondhand smoke can stay in the air for hours.
- The more secondhand smoke that adults or children breathe, the higher the level of toxic chemicals in their bodies.
- Any exposure to secondhand smoke is harmful. There is no safe level.
- Breathing secondhand smoke for even a short time can irritate your lungs. It can also reduce the amount of oxygen in your blood.

Secondhand smoke is especially harmful to babies and children. The most serious health effects during infancy and childhood include:

- Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).
- Weak lungs. Babies who breathe secondhand smoke have weaker lungs than other babies. Also their lungs may not grow to their full potential. This increases their risk of many health problems.
- Breathing problems and infections. Children whose parents smoke around them get bronchitis and pneumonia more often. They have coughs, colds, ear infections, and sinus infections more often.

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• Severe asthma. Secondhand smoke causes more severe and frequent asthma attacks in kids who already have asthma.

Some of these health problems can become serious and even deadly. Others may seem small, but they cause your children pain or discomfort. They also cost your family time and money. Examples are the costs of doctor’s visits, medicine, lost time at school, and lost work time to stay home with your child.

Over time, secondhand smoke can cause serious health problems in nonsmokers, including you and your children. A few examples:

• Cancer. Secondhand smoke has more than 70 chemicals known to cause cancer. It causes lung cancer in people who have never smoked themselves.
• Heart disease. Breathing secondhand smoke makes it more likely that you or your children will get heart disease, have a heart attack, and die early.

Tips to protect your children from secondhand smoke

• If you smoke, ask your doctor and health coach to help you quit. UPMC has many resources and tools to help you. Remember that many people are able to quit after having tried many times before.
• Until you quit, smoke outside. Stay as far away as you can from the entrances to your home and from your children and others. If you smoke inside, air conditioners, fans, open windows, or smoking in another room do NOT protect your children.
• If others in your household smoke:
  – Tell them about the dangers of secondhand smoke to you and your children.
  – Urge them to talk with their doctor about quitting.
  – Ask them how you can help them quit.
• What if they will not or cannot quit? Ask them to smoke outside, away from the house entrance and your children.
• Do not smoke or allow smoking in your car. Ask smokers to let you know when they need a smoke. Stop where it is safe to smoke outside the car.
• Keep your children away from public places where people smoke. Examples are restaurants, childcare centers or schools, parks, playgrounds, sporting events, concerts, restaurants, and buses. Sitting by a window or in a nonsmoking section does NOT protect them.
• Keep your children away from the homes and cars of people who smoke. This includes babysitters, relatives, and the parents of your children’s friends.

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• Even if smokers go outside to smoke when your children are there, the smokers’ homes and cars are still full of toxins.
• Ask friends and family who smoke to visit you instead. Ask them to smoke outside or leave when they feel the urge to smoke.
• Avoid living in multi-unit housing where smoking is allowed. Tobacco smoke can travel through cracks in walls and floors, air ducts, elevator shafts, and crawl spaces.

Is it hard for you to speak up about secondhand smoke? Practice with a friend or family member. Use “I” instead of “you.” Be friendly, but firm. Keep in mind that many people will understand your concerns.

Following the above tips will lower the chance of your children becoming smokers.

What about “thirdhand smoke”?

Toxic particles from secondhand smoke can settle into dust and stick to surfaces such as your hair, skin, clothing, furniture, curtains, and floors/carpets. It can remain there long after the smoke is gone.

Research evidence is building about the dangers of this “thirdhand smoke.”
• It contains cancer-causing chemicals, but it is not yet known whether it causes cancer. The risk may be higher for babies and children who play on the floor and often put things in their mouth.
• It may be stirred up and inhaled with other house dust, absorbed though the skin, or taken in through the mouth.

Has someone been smoking regularly in your home and/or car? Think about having both of them cleaned by a professional. Include ceilings, walls, floors, and carpets as well as curtains, blinds, and furniture. If possible, include ventilation ducts and filters.

Do not do this deep cleaning yourself. You will breathe in toxins and they may get on your skin.
Take Action

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<td>If you smoke, ask your doctor and health coach to help you stop. UPMC has many resources and tools to offer.</td>
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<td>Are you pregnant or may become pregnant? Talk with your doctor about the dangers of secondhand smoke to your developing baby. Ask your health coach for the tip sheet entitled <em>Secondhand Smoke and Pregnancy.</em></td>
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My SMART Goal for This Week

Do your best to reach the SMART* goal you set with your health coach. Write it here and check the box when you have completed it.

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Staying on the Path to Wellness

When you are ready, choose one or two tips above that you would like to put into action. Set a weekly SMART goal for each one. Write your goals here and check the boxes when you have completed them.

• ________________________________________________________________________
• ________________________________________________________________________

“SMART goals are specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic, and timely. For example, “On Saturday I will ask my brother Bill not to smoke in my car, including when we drive to Virginia to visit our parents. I will ask him to let me know when he needs a smoke, and I will pull over somewhere safe so he can smoke outside.”

SMART goals help you succeed! If you have any trouble setting your own weekly SMART goals, ask your health coach for help.
The information in this tip sheet is for educational purposes only and is not intended or implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice. Before making changes, always talk to your doctor about what is right for you.

Sources: