Understanding the Danger of Exposure to Secondhand Smoke

by ANGLEA FINLAY

Asthma and Secondhand Smoke

Inhaling any irritant is sure to provoke your asthma symptoms, but secondhand smoke is particularly bothersome: with 7,000 substances and 70 known cancer-causing compounds, there's a lot in there to irritate your airways, bronchial tubes, and deeper regions of the lungs.

While you may find it relatively easy to avoid cold air, high-pollen counts, and other allergic asthma triggers, secondhand smoke tends to fly under the radar. It's a sneaky trigger, in that it travels farther than you might imagine, and could lurk in a variety of spaces.

Learn why secondhand smoke is so problematic for children and adults with asthma, and take some tips to sidestep the danger altogether.

How Secondhand Smoke Interferes With Breathing

Cigarette smoking tops the list of asthma triggers, but even when not inhaled directly from a cigarette, tobacco smoke can inflame your asthma by:

- Triggering asthma attacks
- Increasing the severity of asthma attacks
- Increasing the risk of developing asthma

Not surprisingly, smoke irritates the already sensitive airways of asthma patients, causing the tissue to swell and the muscle around the bronchial tubes to contract. In both cases, less air will be able to reach the lungs.

Who Suffers Most

Secondhand smoke is clearly bad for everyone, but some people are bound to feel the effects more than others. If your asthma is severe, you may need less of the irritant to suffer uncomfortable breathing problems; a big waft of smoke can have disastrous consequences. However, secondhand smoke can irritate young lungs even more, for a few reasons:

- Children have smaller bodies, and breathe more rapidly than adults. In turn, they will take in more smoke with each breath, and that will leave a higher concentration of carcinogens and toxins in their little lungs.
- Lungs continue to develop throughout childhood, even into the teenage years. Secondhand smoke may stunt lung development in children, leading to less lung volume and worsening respiratory illnesses.
- Children have almost no control of their home environments. If a person chooses to smoke inside the home, children aren't able to escape the smoke by opening windows or leaving the building – they have no choice but to breathe in the smoky air.

Studies are clear on the consequences for children: kids who breathe in secondhand smoke are not only more likely to develop asthma, but they're prone to more frequent and severe asthma attacks. Serious infections of the ear, throat, and lungs are another major area of concern, especially for children under 18 months who are regularly exposed to secondhand smoke.

Next page: how to avoid the dangerous effects of secondhand smoke.

How to Avoid the Dangerous Effects

The first step is to eradicate secondhand smoke from your living space. This means not smoking in your home or car, but also not letting others smoke in a closed environment when you and your children are present. This can take some time and effort, but it's well worth it for a smoke-free, asthma-friendly environment.

Acknowledge That Smoke Travels

Smoking by a window or in another room with the door close is a nice gesture, but it's not good enough. Smoke travels more than you might imagine: just because you don't see the smoke wafting through the house, doesn't mean it's not leaking into other spaces. In fact, smoke is incredibly adept at filling up empty space, just like a gas.

The only way to know for sure that no smoke is traveling through your home is by insisting that smokers take it outside, at least a few feet away from any doors or windows. Since you can't step outside of a moving vehicle, just keep your car smoke-free at all times.

Consider All Spaces

Eradicating smoke from the home is a natural starting point, but other spaces could expose you or your children to secondhand smoke, too. Be sure your child's daycare, school and after-school programs are entirely free from secondhand smoke. If you're unsure, ask the teachers, assistants, and supervisors directly.

Fortunately, most indoor public spaces are smoke-free these days, but some may still allow smoking. Bypass restaurants or cafes that still have smoking sections, even if they're separated from the rest of the room and well-ventilated.

Be Polite, but Firm

Don't be overly concerned with "interfering" in other people's lives if they are smoking nearby — you have every right to keep your breathing space clean and trigger-free. On the other hand, people generally respond much more positively to kind requests than brash demands.

If you're in a situation involving a stranger who's smoking, begin by pointing out that their smoke is drifting into your face. Sometimes, people honestly aren't aware that they may be bothering those around them, and many will apologetically remedy the problem right away. If they respond in a stubborn or rude manner, remove yourself from the situation, or recruit the help of a manager. There's no point in getting too upset or giving a lecture to someone who doesn't care to listen.

It may seem like a simple annoyance, but secondhand smoke is a very real danger to asthmatics. The fact that it travels quickly and is difficult to police certainly makes things more difficult, but remember that there are plenty of ways to avoid it. Your lungs, and your family's lungs, will appreciate your efforts!