

# Fact Sheet

## Passive smoking



### What is passive smoking?

Passive smoking is breathing in smoke from other people's cigarettes, cigars or pipes. Smoke that is breathed out by a smoker is called exhaled mainstream smoke. The smoke drifting from the burning end of a cigarette is called sidestream smoke. Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS) is a combination of mainstream and sidestream smoke.

Sidestream smoke tends to remain in a room longer and contains many cancer causing substances, more than mainstream smoke. As Australians spend a greater part of each day indoors, ETS is a serious but preventable health hazard. Children in particular are at risk of harmful effects from passive smoking.

### What is the health risk for unborn babies?

Smoking during pregnancy is harmful to the developing baby. When a pregnant woman is exposed to tobacco smoke, harmful substances absorbed into the mother's bloodstream can cross the placenta and affect her unborn baby. Smoking in pregnancy also reduces blood flow through the placenta, which can reduce the amount of oxygen, and nutrients the baby receives. Exposure to tobacco smoke during pregnancy can significantly increase the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, prematurity, low birth weight and sudden infant death syndrome.

### What is the health risk for children?

- Children exposed to ETS are more likely to develop a range of

illnesses including middle ear infections, croup, bronchitis, bronchiolitis, pneumonia and asthma compared to children living in smoke-free environments. Impaired learning, slower growth and changes in behavior can be linked with children's exposure to passive smoke.

- Both asthma and respiratory infections (characterised by wheezing, breathlessness, cough and phlegm) are increased in children whose parents smoke. Children of smoking parents are about twice as likely to have symptoms of asthma before they are five years old. Tobacco smoke also triggers asthma attacks and makes a child's asthma more severe than it would otherwise be. Many environmental factors contribute to asthma; passive smoking is one that you can avoid.

### What are the main sources of ETS for children?

Parents, family and friends who smoke in enclosed areas such as cars and homes are the main source of ETS for children. The harmful effects on children increase with the number of parents or other household members who smoke. Currently in NSW, there is a joint initiative between NSW Health, The Cancer Council NSW, National Heart foundation, Asthma NSW and SIDS NSW to make the car and home smoke-free zones.

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### What you can do to protect your child?

Quitting smoking is the ultimate goal for parents and carers of young children, but other approaches can also make a difference. Options include choosing not to smoke in the car or home or any other enclosed space where children spend time. When visiting friends or leaving your child in the care of another person, consider whether that environment is smoke-free and encourage friends and family who smoke to consider not smoking around children if possible.

Seeking help from people experienced in the problems of giving up smoking (Quitline counsellors, doctors or chemists) is also helpful. This is particularly important for women who are pregnant or planning pregnancy so that safe options are recommended and made available to them.

As children from smoking families are more likely to take up smoking themselves, parents who quit smoking provide a positive role model for them.

### Remember

- Passive smoke is harmful to children
- You can choose not to smoke in front of children, particularly in enclosed areas such as the car

and home, and ask others to do the same.

- There is support available through the Quitline on 131 848, doctor or chemist.
- Every child has the right to grow up in a 'smoke free environment'.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only.  
Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for your child.

the children's hospital at Westmead

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