Children’s Health Risks Associated with Second Hand Smoke Exposure

According to the American Cancer Society, there are approximately 45 million people who smoke in the United States. Although smoking has long been proven to be detrimental to one’s health, environmental tobacco smoke exposure (ETS) or second hand smoke, can be just as lethal. ETS can contain larger amounts of the cancer causing toxins found in cigarettes. Thus, individuals that are exposed to ETS are in danger for much of the same health risks that are associated with smoking.

Approximately 60 percent of children between the ages of 3 and 11 are subjected to second hand smoke on a regular basis. Children living in homes with smoking parents are especially at risk for health problems. Given that their bodies are still maturing, children are more susceptible to the adverse effects of the toxins found in tobacco smoke. Exposure to ETS has been connected to many health complications in children. These complications include respiratory illness such as bronchitis and pneumonia, sudden infant death syndrome, asthma, and middle ear infections.

Women who are exposed to second hand smoke during their pregnancy may be subjecting their unborn children to some of the same consequences as women who smoke during their pregnancy. Such consequences include weaker lungs in infants, low birth weight, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Second hand smoke exposure in children and infants has also been related to high incidences of hospitalizations and doctor visits. The American Lung Association found that second hand smoke was related to 7,500-15,000 hospitalizations each year in children under the age of 18 months.

Although the Surgeon General has yet to find a “safe” level of exposure to ETS, there are ways to protect children from these adverse effects. Since it has been shown that
children living in smoking homes have higher levels of the chemicals related to ETS exposure, placing a smoking ban inside homes and vehicles can protect children from harmful chemicals. Also, by educating children about the dangers of second hand smoke they can learn the tools they need in order to protect themselves from ETS.

For further information regarding this article please contact Tiffany Pelletier at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., Suite 309W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9829 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD

The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is funded in part by the Georgia Department of Human Resources Division of Public Health

References:


