Exposure to Secondhand Smoke

Involuntary exposure of nonsmokers to tobacco smoke, or “secondhand smoke,” has been a topic of interest for researchers for the past twenty years. Secondhand smoke is similar to the mainstream smoke inhaled by the smoker, in that it is a complex mixture containing many chemicals, including formaldehyde, cyanide, carbon monoxide, ammonia, and nicotine. Among young children younger than 18 years of age, an estimated 22 percent are exposed to secondhand smoke in their homes, with estimates ranging from 11.7 percent in Utah to 34.2 percent in Kentucky.

Much progress has been made in reducing involuntary exposure in many workplaces, restaurants, and public places. However, more than 126 million nonsmokers are still exposed. Of those 126 million, many are children who are exposed in the home environment. According to the recent Surgeon General’s report regarding the health consequences of involuntary exposure to tobacco smoke, clinicians should routinely ask about secondhand smoke exposure, particularly in susceptible groups or when a child has had an illness caused by secondhand smoke, such as pneumonia. Because of the high levels of exposure among young children, their exposure should be considered a significant pediatric issue.

For more complete information regarding secondhand smoke exposure, please see “The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke: A Report of the Surgeon General (2006)” or visit http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco

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