

Secondhand and Thirdhand Smoke: Silent Health Hazards



Defining terms:

“Secondhand smoke” is breathing in someone else’s smoke from using tobacco products.

“Thirdhand smoke” is being exposed to the nicotine and other chemicals that settle on personal items and indoors, even after the smoke is gone.

What are the health effects?

Secondhand smoke...

- Exposes you to more than 7,000 chemicals, 70 of which are cancer-causing.
- Causes over 41,000 deaths annually in the United States.

Non-smokers exposed to secondhand smoke have a...

- 25-30% increased risk of coronary heart disease.
- 20-30% increased risk of lung cancer.
- 20-30% increased risk of stroke.

Thirdhand smoke...

- Is less well studied, but research suggests exposure to hundreds of harmful chemicals.
- Contains at least 2 known cancer-causing compounds.
- Can remain in a smoker’s home for years, even if smoking has ceased.
- Can cause harm to non-smokers too.

Who is affected?

Secondhand and thirdhand smoke is dangerous for everyone, but particularly for:

- Pregnant individuals: serious reproductive effects include low birth weight and irregular breastfeeding.
- Children: health effects include respiratory and ear infections, asthma attacks, and even Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) in babies.

Certain groups of individuals are at higher risk for high exposure to secondhand and thirdhand smoke, including:

- Children/youth and adolescents
- Racial/ethnic minorities
- Residents in multi-unit housing complexes
- Non-office workers, especially employees in the hospitality industry (bars, restaurants, casinos, etc.)





The effects of secondhand and thirdhand smoke exposure on the body are immediate. There is no “safe” level of exposure:

- Exposure can produce harmful effects within 60 minutes that can last at least 3 hours.
- Just 30 minutes in a smoky room increases the risk for a heart attack.
- The longer the duration and higher the level of exposure, the greater the risk of developing lung cancer.

Misconceptions that do NOT reduce exposure to secondhand and thirdhand smoke.

Myths	Facts
Using air conditioners and fans is sufficient for eliminating second and thirdhand smoke.	Harmful chemicals linger in the air long after smoking, and ventilation systems cannot remove them.
Designating specific areas, like a section or room of a restaurant, protects others.	Smoke easily travels through a building’s ventilation.
Thirdhand smoke is not harmful.	Thirdhand smoke leaves harmful chemicals that stick to clothing, surfaces, and walls, and exposure impacts the body like smoking or secondhand smoke.
Cleaning regularly can eliminate thirdhand smoke.	Regular household cleaning methods do not effectively remove thirdhand smoke chemicals. The only way to completely remove them is by replacing carpets, repainting walls, and cleaning ventilation systems.

Tips to protect yourself and your families from secondhand and thirdhand smoke:

- Implement no-smoking rules at home and in the car: establish clear rules and inform babysitters, repair workers, and other visitors that your space is smoke-free.
- Choose smoke-free environments for you and your family; for example, visit restaurants, bars, and public places that prohibit smoking. Look for tobacco- or smoke-free policies in your children’s schools and daycare centers.
- Clean regularly and wash personal items: keep places where smoke can linger clean, including carpets, furniture, walls, and clothing.

How to seek help:

- Talk to your health or substance use care provider.
- Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW (784-8669) for free help from your state tobacco quitline.
- Visit www.smokefree.gov for a step-by-step plan for quitting.