

The smokers next door: Second-hand smoke in apartments and condos affects children's health

<http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/En/News/NewsAndFeatures/Pages/Smokers-next-door.aspx>

You don't smoke. Your workplace, your local restaurant, your child's school, even your local park is smoke-free. You ask smokers not to smoke in your home. And yet, your child is still exposed to second-hand smoke. For millions of children who live in apartments and condos, exposure to second-hand smoke from elsewhere in the building is a daily reality.

Deborah Shub was pregnant when the smell of smoke in the condo she shares with her husband really started to bother her. "It was waking me up at night," she says. "We got in touch with the property manager and the condo board. We figured it was a ventilation problem."

Several uneasy negotiations with the neighbours and an extensive renovation later, the condo still smells like smoke.

"With a ten-month-old daughter, it's really upsetting," Shub says. "We end up having to open doors to the outside no matter what the weather is like, to try and get the smoke out." She and her husband are on the verge of ordering an \$800 air filter as part of their search for clean air. They're also looking for a house to buy. "Every time the smoke gets worse, the search intensifies. The situation obviously isn't stopping, and I don't want my daughter to be in this environment."

The health effects of second-hand smoke in children are well known. They include a higher risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS); less lung capacity and more breathing problems such as asthma, cough, bronchitis, croup, and pneumonia; worse asthma symptoms; and more ear infections. The effects are not only physical: children exposed to second-hand smoke have lower test scores in math, reading, and logic, and may also have more behaviour problems.

Children are more vulnerable to second-hand smoke than adults for a variety of reasons. They breathe faster and their immune systems are less developed. They also have less power to escape. It's harder for children to complain about smoke, or to leave a smoky area by themselves – especially if that area is their own home.

Shub, like many parents, is concerned that the smoke is affecting her daughter's health. The baby girl has had a raspy voice for the last month.

A recent study in Pediatrics found that 73% of children living in non-smoking homes have a marker in their blood called cotinine, which shows they have been exposed to tobacco smoke. Children living in apartments had 45% more cotinine than children who lived in detached houses, even after adjusting for age, sex, ethnicity, and poverty. Exposure levels in children who lived in attached housing, such as semi-



Illustration by Carey Sookocheff

detached houses or row houses, were intermediate. The study used data from the 2001-2006 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) and included 5002 children between the ages of 6 and 18. Children who lived in a house where someone smoked, or who smoked themselves, were excluded from the study.

Keeping smoke contained is a challenge

It's difficult to keep the smoke out when you share a wall – or worse, a ventilation system – with a smoker. A 2006 survey of multi-unit dwellers in Ontario found that almost half had tobacco smoke enter their units from somewhere else in the building. A recent study of low-income apartments in Boston found that 89% of apartments inhabited by non-smokers had detectable air nicotine levels. Smoke can enter a home through open windows and doors, of course, but it can also make its way through cracks and gaps in the walls, floor, or ceiling, or through electrical outlets, cable or phone jacks, pipes, or light fixtures. Shared or neighbouring ventilation systems can force smoke from one unit to another.

Sealing up the cracks can help, but it doesn't always work. Shub and her husband put hoods on their kitchen exhaust fan and their neighbour's, then sealed up electrical sockets and other chinks during an extensive kitchen renovation. For a time, the smoke smell seemed to abate, but then smoke started wafting in from the hallway. "Especially the last little while, it's been horrendous," Shub says. "We're still trying to figure out why."

While getting the neighbours to butt out would solve the problem, this is an area where one neighbour's health concerns clash with another's right to smoke in their own home. Some towns, such as Belmont, California, have gone so far as to ban smoking anywhere in multi-unit buildings. But in most jurisdictions, the subject is a touchy one. Governments are reluctant to regulate what smokers can and cannot do in their own homes. Landlords and condo boards may not want to get involved. In Ontario, the Residential Tenancy Act gives tenants the right to "quiet enjoyment" of their home, but does not mention second-hand smoke.

"Quiet enjoyment," Shub says, "more literally seems to mean you can't be blasting your music at all hours of the night." She finds it ironic that noise complaints seem to be taken more seriously than second-hand smoke. "I don't understand how people feel like they have the right to inflict [their smoke] on other people."

Some co-ops and condos are phasing in non-smoking bylaws, a change that is welcomed by a public increasingly concerned about second-hand smoke. In Ontario and many other places, landlords and boards cannot change existing agreements, meaning that current smokers can't be forced to go smoke-free inside their own units. However, once a smoker moves out, the unit can be made smoke-free.

What can families do about second-hand smoke in multi-unit housing?

If a neighbour's smoke is entering your apartment or condo, you do have some options.

- Try to figure out where the smoke is coming from and how it is entering your unit.
- Talk to the neighbour who smokes. They may not be aware their smoke is causing a problem, and may be willing to make some changes.

- Document the problems, including the dates and times that smoke was a problem, any health effects your family is experiencing, and your efforts to solve the problem. Talk to other neighbours and see if they are also having smoke problems.
- Contact your landlord, tenant association, co-op or condo board to inform them about the issue. Landlords in rental properties must act on all reasonable complaints from tenants.
- If you are a landlord or condo owner, making repairs or changes to the building, such as sealing cracks, weather-stripping doors, and upgrading ventilation systems, may help with smoke problems.
- Advocate to make part or all of the building smoke-free. Various associations have information about your rights and the benefits and business implications of going smoke-free.

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2/28/2011

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