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Second-Hand Smoking and Children

By Deborah Pardo-Kaplan

Everyone in my mother's house in Montreal, Canada, smoked as she grew up in the 1950s. Her father inhaled three packs of unfiltered cigarettes per day, and her mother and her nanny lit up daily. At the time, my mother didn't realize that she too was a smoker—a passive one.

"I smoked like a chimney," says Phyllis Rideout, my mother's nanny, who still lives with my grandmother.

On weekends, my grandmother would invite eight ladies for card games. They would sit around a table in the kitchen or living room for two days and chain smoke, says Peggy Pardo, my mother. "They'd light the next cigarette with one still going." As a child, my mother enjoyed all the excitement. She was ignorant of the dangers the party brought to her health.

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Although smoking tobacco dates back 3000 years to Central

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America, the link between smoking and lung cancer only emerged during my mother's youth. With each cigarette, smokers exhale more than 4,700 chemicals, 200 poisons, and 50 human carcinogens, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. The exhaled smoke from their lungs, or from the burning end of the cigarettes, is called second-hand smoke and it greatly harms those nearby—especially children. This dangerous smoke causes greater risk of respiratory tract infections, such as pneumonia and bronchitis, ear infections, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Smoking in the home eventually did affect my mother's lungs, prompting her first asthma attack at age 13. Her friend's cat sparked an ongoing shortness of breath all night during a sleepover. When my grandmother took her to the doctor, he informed her that my mom had allergies and recommended getting rid of the carpets in her room, her curtains, and watching out for dust. He never mentioned keeping her away from smokers.

"That was the culture then," said Hilda Jacobson, my grandmother. "Look at the movies—you never saw anyone without a cigarette in their hand." In addition, restaurants and airplanes permitted smoking in those days.

My mother was not alone in her exposure to second-hand smoke in her home. The World Health Organization estimates that 700 million, or half the world's children, are frequently exposed to smoke at home. In the United States, 43 percent of children are passive smokers in their own homes, according to the American Lung Association.

In the past 30 years, doctors have become more aware of the negative effects of second-hand smoke on children. They now know it aggravates asthma symptoms of up to one million children and causes thousands to develop it each year. Asthma has become the main chronic childhood disease in the United States.

Deborah Stang, a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner with Dedham Medical Associates in Norwood, Massachusetts, sees at least five children with asthma during her 20-hour workweek (they may not be visiting for that reason). "It becomes a diagnosis for the child," she says about the term "passive smoker" on the patient's problem sheet. She then flags the child's file so she can follow up.

Sometimes Stang smells smoke on the parents' clothing and breath. This indicates the parents smoke at home near the children, she says. "The smoke persists; it clings to the furniture, to the curtains."

"Anytime I see a baby with a recurrent ear infection, I ask [the parents] if there's anyone smoking in the house," says Stang. Doctors see 700,000 to 1.6 million children with middle-ear problems caused by second-hand smoke, according to the American Lung Association.

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The Pediatric Environmental Health Center at Children's Hospital Boston, in Boston, Massachusetts, does not list second-hand smoke on its website with other environmental toxins such as lead, mercury, or pesticides. Questions about indoor smoking do, however, arise as part of a routine environmental assessment, says Suzanne Giroux, coordinator of the program. "Our doctors are aware of it as a health problem," Giroux says. "We see an increasing number of respiratory problems."

Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

The best time for a woman to quit smoking is during pregnancy or in its planning stage, according to the American Lung Association. If a woman continues to smoke while pregnant, the placenta will absorb the cigarette's poisons, such as nicotine and carbon monoxide. The pregnant woman should also avoid second-hand smoke, which increases health risks. The risks of smoking during pregnancy include:

- Greater chance of loss of the baby.
- Premature birth, before the baby's lungs are fully developed.
- A low-weight baby.
- Reduced IQ, according to a recent Environmental Health Perspectives study that shows passive smoking lowers a child's IQ by two to five points.

A woman who quits smoking during her pregnancy should note that resuming the habit after childbirth is still unsafe. Even if the mom does not smoke around her infant after delivery, the child is still at risk if mom is breastfeeding, since a baby will also absorb the poisons through the breast milk.

Reducing Risk to Children

So what's the best way to keep your children from becoming second-hand smokers? The American Lung Association and the Nemours Foundation offer the following solutions:

- The obvious one: quit smoking. It is possible. According to the Centers for Disease Control (1994), one half of all living adult smokers have quit.
- If a pregnant woman quits within the first three or four months of her pregnancy, she reduces the chances of health problems for the baby.
- Stand at least 10 feet away from children when smoking, and don't allow your kids to stand near others who are smoking.
- Tell visitors to smoke outside of the home.

Fifty years ago, smoking was pervasive. "It was so much a part of our lives, I don't remember it being odd," my mother says.

Today, research and awareness has changed. More benefits than drawbacks can result from not smoking. If adults ceased from using tobacco, and children didn't take up the habit, the Environmental

Protection Agency predicts that 30 percent of all cancer deaths would be prevented.

About the Author

Deborah Pardo-Kaplan is a former Montrealer now based in Boston. She has been working as a freelance writer after graduating from Columbia University's journalism school. She married last summer and hopes to have children next year.

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