

That cigarettes are lethal is no longer news. Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, causing almost one in five of all deaths in this country each year, totaling nearly half a million Americans.

When many people think of tobacco-related health problems, they think only of adults, and the heart disease, cancer, and emphysema directly resulting from their long-term smoking. But children and adolescents suffer from serious tobacco-related health problems as well.

Almost half of all homes in America have at least one smoker living there. This means that millions of children in the United States cannot help breathing secondhand smoke in their own homes. This puts them in more danger than most smokers realize.

Secondhand smoke is the smoke a smoker breathes out, and that comes from the tip of burning cigarettes, cigars, and pipes. It contains over 4000 chemicals, many of which are poisonous and dangerous, including more than 50 known to cause cancer. Not surprising then that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1992 labeled secondhand smoke as a "Group A" carcinogen – a substance that produces cancer in humans.

Secondhand smoke and its poisonous toxins can be especially harmful to children's health because their lungs and young bodies are still developing. Compared to infants and children of nonsmokers, children who regularly breathe secondhand smoke have more upper respiratory infections, more lower respiratory infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia, more ear infections, and reduced hearing, due to chronic middle ear fluid.

Children of smokers also cough and wheeze more, and have a harder time getting over colds. Secondhand smoke may also cause them other chronic and uncomfortable symptoms, such as stuffy nose, headache, sore throat, eye irritation, and hoarseness. Secondhand smoke is clearly a serious health hazard for children.

Children exposed to as few as ten cigarettes a day have an increased risk of developing asthma. Between ten and twenty-five thousand children develop asthma every year directly as a result of breathing tobacco smoke. And children already with asthma are especially sensitive to secondhand smoke. Breathing in smoke may cause more asthma attacks, and the attacks are often more severe, requiring medical attention or even hospitalization.

Women who smoke while pregnant not only expose their baby to harmful chemicals, they increase the risk of such serious consequences as miscarriage, premature birth, lower birth weight than expected, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), learning problems, and attention-deficit hyperactivity syndrome. As many as one in three deaths from SIDS are related to maternal tobacco use during the pregnancy or during the infant's first year.

The health risks go up the longer a pregnant woman smokes, and the more she smokes. Quitting any time during pregnancy helps – of course, sooner is better. Too many expectant mothers who smoke tell their doctors that they're going to quit as soon as the baby is born. To them, doctors say, "Why wait?"

Every day, nearly 2000 American teenagers become established smokers. Ninety percent of all smokers began the habit in adolescence. Today, one in five high school girls is a smoker, and one in six high school boys. Adolescence is the only age group in the United States in recent years to see an increase in rates of smoking.

Teenagers have for all time been strongly influenced by social pressure, the need to fit in, how they see themselves, and how they want others to see them. For these reasons, they are today also strongly influenced by advertising, and by Hollywood.

The tobacco industry has long recognized the value of smoking in ads and in movies to promote cigarettes. Movies, especially, teach children and teens that smoking is glamorous, cool, sexy, and rebellious. Movie smokers are strong, respected, worldly and adventurous. Smoking is seen as a means for stress relief, and as a part of the rituals of celebration and romance.

These false images of smoking help establish in teens the perception that smoking is normal, prevalent, and even desirable in society, especially among adults. But what the movie stars and ads never show to teenagers are the harmful effects of smoking, such as bad breath, stained teeth, wrinkled skin, long-term cough, decreased athletic performance, addiction to nicotine, and an increased risk of developing lung cancer and heart disease.

Nor do they tell teens how expensive smoking is, or how offensive and unattractive it is to others. Most teenage boys and girls when surveyed say they wouldn't want to date someone who smokes. As one teenage girl put it, "Kissing a boy who smokes is like kissing an ashtray!"

Often overlooked as a consequence of smoking is the fact that children who live in a household with smokers are at greater risk of injury and death from fire. Cigarette lighters can be found in over 30 million American homes, and each year children under the age of five playing with lighters cause more than 5000 home fires, resulting in about 150 deaths and more than 1000 injuries.

Keep children safe from injury by never allowing anyone to smoke while holding a child. Never leave a lit cigarette, cigar, or pipe inside or outside. Keep matches and lighters out of children's reach. And remember that while butane lighters may be child-resistant, they are not child-proof.

Parents need to make every effort of keep their children away from smokers, and from secondhand smoke. If you smoke, set the example by quitting smoking today. Make your home and car smoke-free (cracking the windows doesn't count). Remove children from child care settings where there are smokers. Sit in non-smoking sections in public places. Ask people not to smoke in your home.

These responsibilities belong not only to parents. It is every adult's job to help ensure that the air our children breathe is clean, safe, and smoke-free.