

A Vision for the Future

This country has experienced a substantial reduction of involuntary exposure to secondhand tobacco smoke in recent decades. Significant reductions in the rate of smoking among adults began even earlier. Consequently, about 80 percent of adults are now nonsmokers, and many adults and children can live their daily lives without being exposed to secondhand smoke. Nevertheless, involuntary exposure to secondhand smoke remains a serious public health hazard.

This report documents the mounting and now substantial evidence characterizing the health risks caused by exposure to secondhand smoke. Multiple major reviews of the evidence have concluded that secondhand smoke is a known human carcinogen, and that exposure to secondhand smoke causes adverse effects, particularly on the cardiovascular system and the respiratory tract and on the health of those exposed, children as well as adults. Unfortunately, reductions in exposure have been slower among young children than among adults during the last decade, as expanding workplace restrictions now protect the majority of adults while homes remain the most important source of exposure for children.

Clearly, the social norms regarding secondhand smoke have changed dramatically, leading to widespread support over the past 30 years for a society free of involuntary exposures to tobacco smoke. In the first half of the twentieth century smoking was permitted in almost all public places, including elevators and all types of public transportation. At the time of the 1964 Surgeon General's report on smoking and health (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare [USDHEW] 1964), many physicians were still smokers, and the tables in U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) meeting rooms had PHS ashtrays on them. A thick, smoky haze was an accepted part of presentations at large meetings, even at medical conferences and in the hospital environment.

As the adverse health consequences of active smoking became more widely documented in the 1960s, many people began to question whether exposure of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke also posed a serious health risk. This topic was first addressed in this series of reports by Surgeon General Jesse Steinfeld in the 1972 report to Congress (USDHEW 1972). During the 1970s, policy changes to provide

smoke-free environments received more widespread consideration. As the public policy debate grew and expanded in the 1980s, the scientific evidence on the risk of adverse effects from exposure to secondhand smoke was presented in a comprehensive context for the first time by Surgeon General C. Everett Koop in the 1986 report, *The Health Consequences of Involuntary Smoking* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS] 1986).

The ever-increasing momentum for smoke-free indoor environments has been driven by scientific evidence on the health risks of involuntary exposure to secondhand smoke. This new Surgeon General's report is based on a far larger body of evidence than was available in 1986. The evidence reviewed in these 665 pages confirms the findings of the 1986 report and adds new causal conclusions. The growing body of data increases support for the conclusion that exposure to secondhand smoke causes lung cancer in lifetime nonsmokers. In addition to epidemiologic data, this report presents converging evidence that the mechanisms by which secondhand smoke causes lung cancer are similar to those that cause lung cancer in active smokers. In the context of the risks from active smoking, the lung cancer risk that secondhand smoke exposure poses to nonsmokers is consistent with an extension to involuntary smokers of the dose-response relationship for active smokers.

Cardiovascular effects of even short exposures to secondhand smoke are readily measurable, and the risks for cardiovascular disease from involuntary smoking appear to be about 50 percent less than the risks for active smokers. Although the risks from secondhand smoke exposures are larger than anticipated, research on the mechanisms by which tobacco smoke exposure affects the cardiovascular system supports the plausibility of the findings of epidemiologic studies (the 1986 report did not address cardiovascular disease). This 2006 report also reviews the evidence on the multiple mechanisms by which secondhand smoke injures the respiratory tract and causes sudden infant death syndrome.

Since 1986, the attitude of the public toward and the social norms around secondhand smoke exposure have changed dramatically to reflect a growing viewpoint that the involuntary exposure of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke is unacceptable. As a result,

increasingly strict public policies to control involuntary exposure to secondhand smoke have been put in place. The need for restrictions on smoking in enclosed public places is now widely accepted in the United States. A growing number of communities, counties, and states are requiring smoke-free environments for nearly all enclosed public places, including all private worksites, restaurants, bars, and casinos.

As knowledge about the health risks of secondhand smoke exposure grows, investigators continue to identify additional scientific questions.

- Because active smoking is firmly established as a causal factor of cancer for a large number of sites, and because many scientists assert that there may be no threshold for carcinogenesis from tobacco smoke exposure, researchers hypothesize that people who are exposed to secondhand smoke are likely to be at some risk for the same types of cancers that have been established as smoking-related among active smokers.
- The potential risks for stroke and subclinical vascular disease from secondhand smoke exposure require additional research.
- There is a need for additional research on the etiologic relationship between secondhand smoke exposure and several respiratory health outcomes in adults, including respiratory symptoms, declines in lung function, and adult-onset asthma.
- There is also a need for research to further evaluate the adverse reproductive outcomes and childhood respiratory effects from both prenatal and postnatal exposure to secondhand smoke.
- Further research and improved methodologies are also needed to advance an understanding of the potential effects on cognitive, behavioral, and physical development that might be related to early exposures to secondhand smoke.

As these and other research questions are addressed, the scientific literature documenting the adverse health effects of exposure to secondhand smoke will expand. Over the past 40 years since the release of the landmark 1964 report of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health (USDHEW 1964), researchers have compiled an ever-growing list of adverse health effects caused by exposure to tobacco smoke, with evidence that active

smoking causes damage to virtually every organ of the body (USDHHS 2004). Similarly, since the 1986 report (USDHHS 1986), the number of adverse health effects caused by exposure to secondhand smoke has also expanded. Following the format of the electronic database released with the 2004 report, the research findings supporting the conclusions in this report will be accessible in a database that can be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco>. With an this expanding base of scientific knowledge, the list of adverse health effects caused by exposure to secondhand smoke will likely increase.

Biomarker data from the 2005 *Third National Report on Human Exposure to Environmental Chemicals* document great progress since the 1986 report in reducing the involuntary exposure of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke (CDC 2005). Between the late 1980s and 2002, the median cotinine level (a metabolite of nicotine) among nonsmokers declined by more than 70 percent. Nevertheless, many challenges remain to maintain the momentum toward universal smoke-free environments. First, there is a need to continue and even improve the surveillance of sources and levels of exposure to secondhand smoke. The data from the 2005 exposure report show that median cotinine levels among children are more than twice those of nonsmoking adults, and non-Hispanic Blacks have levels more than twice those of Mexican Americans and non-Hispanic Whites (CDC 2005). The multiple factors related to these disparities in median cotinine levels among nonsmokers need to be identified and addressed. Second, the data from the 2005 exposure report suggest that the scientific community should sustain the current momentum to reduce exposures of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke (CDC 2005). Research reviewed in this report indicates that policies creating completely smoke-free environments are the most economical and efficient approaches to providing this protection. Additionally, neither central heating, ventilating, and air conditioning systems nor separately ventilated rooms control exposures to secondhand smoke. Unfortunately, data from the 2005 exposure report also emphasized that young children remain an exposed population (CDC 2005). However, more evidence is needed on the most effective strategies to promote voluntary changes in smoking norms and practices in homes and private automobiles. Finally, data on the health consequences of secondhand smoke exposures emphasize the importance of the role of health care professionals in this issue. They must assume a greater, more active involvement in reducing exposures, particularly for susceptible groups.

The findings and recommendations of this report can be extended to other countries and are supportive of international efforts to address the health effects of smoking and secondhand smoke exposure. There is an international consensus that exposure to secondhand smoke poses significant public health risks. The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control recognizes that protecting nonsmokers from involuntary exposures to secondhand smoke in public places should be an integral part of comprehensive national tobacco control policies and programs. Recent changes in national policies in countries such as Italy and Ireland reflect this growing international awareness of the need for additional protection of nonsmokers from involuntary exposures to secondhand smoke.

When this series of reports began in 1964, the majority of men and a substantial proportion of women were smokers, and most nonsmokers inevitably must have been involuntary smokers. With the release of the 1986 report, Surgeon General Koop noted that “the right of smokers to smoke ends where their behavior affects the health and well-being of others” (USDHHS 1986, p. xii). As understanding increases regarding health consequences from even brief exposures to secondhand smoke, it becomes even clearer that the health of nonsmokers overall, and particularly

the health of children, individuals with existing heart and lung problems, and other vulnerable populations, requires a higher priority and greater protection.

Together, this report and the 2004 report of the Surgeon General, *The Health Consequences of Smoking* (USDHHS 2004), document the extraordinary threat to the nation’s health from active and involuntary smoking. The recent reductions in exposures of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke represent significant progress, but involuntary exposures persist in many settings and environments. More evidence is needed to understand why this progress has not been equally shared across all populations and in all parts of this nation. Some states (California, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island, and Washington) have met the *Healthy People 2010* objectives (USDHHS 2000) that protect against involuntary exposures to secondhand smoke through recommended policies, regulations, and laws, while many other parts of this nation have not (USDHHS 2000). Evidence presented in this report suggests that these disparities in levels of protection can be reduced or eliminated. Sustained progress toward a society free of involuntary exposures to secondhand smoke should remain a national public health priority.

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