

## 31.05.05

### Fact sheet

## Health Effects of Exposure to Secondhand Smoke

### What is secondhand smoke?

- Secondhand smoke (SHS) or environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) is the smoke inhaled by an individual not actively engaged in smoking. <sup>1</sup> It is also known as passive smoking.
- SHS is a mixture of the smoke given off by the burning end of a cigarette, pipe or cigar (sidestream smoke) and the smoke exhaled from the lungs of smokers (mainstream smoke). <sup>2, 3</sup>

### Why is secondhand smoke harmful?

- SHS contains the same harmful chemicals as smokers inhale. It has over 4000 chemicals <sup>4</sup> including 5 regulated hazardous air pollutants, 47 regulated hazardous wastes, over 50 cancer causing agents and more than 100 chemical poisons. <sup>5</sup>
- SHS lingers in the air for hours after cigarettes have been extinguished and can cause or worsen a wide range of adverse health effects such as lung cancer, <sup>2,4,6-8,10</sup> coronary heart disease <sup>2,6,7,10</sup> and respiratory symptoms <sup>2,4, 6-10</sup> (as in asthma). Some reviews suggest a causal link between SHS exposure and nasal sinus cancers. <sup>2, 7, 8</sup>
- There is a strong link between SHS and adverse health effects in children. <sup>6</sup> SHS exposure can cause low birth weight, <sup>2, 9</sup> sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), <sup>2, 8, 10</sup> middle ear infections and chest infections. <sup>2, 4, 7-10</sup> SHS may induce asthma in children <sup>2, 8</sup> or make asthma symptoms worse. <sup>2, 4, 8-10</sup>
- Ventilation systems and smoke-free areas are not effective in reducing exposure to harmful substances in SHS. Ventilation will need to produce ‘tornado-like levels of air flow’ to achieve even minimal levels of risk. <sup>11</sup>
- Recent estimates suggest, well over 10,000 people die each year from exposure to SHS, in the UK. <sup>12</sup> In the North East, SHS exposure kills about 200 people under 65, every year. <sup>13</sup>
- SHS increases the risk of lung cancer in adults by 20-30 per cent. and the risk of coronary heart diseases by 25-35 per cent. <sup>14</sup>
- The impact of secondhand smoke on the heart can be measured after as little as half an hour of exposure. <sup>15</sup>

## **SHS and Workplace exposure**

- There is no safe level of exposure to tobacco smoke, below which no adverse effects occur. <sup>15</sup>
- The BMA estimates that SHS kills about 4 times as many as accidents in the workplace. <sup>14</sup>
- US based studies show that restaurant workers are exposed to approximately 1.6 to 2 times higher levels of SHS exposure whilst at work than office workers. <sup>16</sup>
- In the UK, exposure to SHS at work may cause more than 600 deaths each year, including over 50 deaths in the hospitality industry. <sup>12</sup>
- In the North East, around 35 people under the age of 65 are estimated to die every year from exposure to SHS in the workplace. <sup>13</sup>

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