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Healthy Living: Secondhand smoke significant source of lead exposure for children

By: Katie Gibas

Kids in families with one smoker had lead levels 14 percent higher than children who live with non-smokers. That number jumped to 24 percent if children lived with two or more smokers. Katie Gibas reports.



One in five children under the age of 11 live with at least one smoker.

"Parents who smoke who have small children are endangering their children but not only by direct effects of the smoke, by increasing that child's chance of getting cancer getting cancer in the future, by increasing that child's chances of becoming a nicotine addict in the future, but also by increasing their lead burden," said Dr. Leslie Kohman, the Upstate Cancer Center Medical Director.

Researchers from Johns Hopkins have discovered that second-hand smoke is a significant source of lead exposure in children.

"Children absorb 50 percent of the lead that they're exposed to, but with adults, it's much smaller," said Dr. Kohman.

Chris Owens, the Franciscan Companies Tobacco Cessation Center Director added, "Especially with the younger kids who still get picked up and held for an extended period of time, those chemicals that are embedded in their clothes and hair can easily be transferred to those small children."

Over five years, researchers studied more than 10,500 children between the ages of three and 11. Their parents were surveyed about their smoking habits. Kids in families with one smoker had lead levels 14 percent higher than children who live with non-smokers. That number jumped to 24 percent if children lived with two or more smokers.

"Because children are much more sensitive to lead because of their small body size and still developing brain and nervous system, they're much more at risk from this," said Dr. Kohman.

Lead exposure carries a number of health risks for children.

"A lot of it is neurological. It is weakness. Inability to move certain joints, lower brain development, lower IQ," said Dr. Kohman.

Researchers recommend, as part of routine medical exams, children should be tested for lead and parents should be given information on how to reduce lead exposure. They also say legislation that promotes smoke-free environments and prohibits smoking in cars and public places where children gather, as well as increasing lead prevention programs that evaluate smoking at home would greatly reduce lead exposure in children.

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