

Secondhand Smoke Permeates Many Apartment Buildings: Study

Advocate wants smoking bans in housing complexes to safeguard kids from incursion

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SUNDAY, April 29 (HealthDay News) -- A new survey of American apartment dwellers reveals that upwards of a third of nonsmoking residents sniff the stench of secondhand smoke in their building's public spaces, while almost half smell it within their own homes.

"As a pediatrician, I have had a lot of feedback from parents who have been telling me that this is really a significant issue for them," said study author Dr. Karen Wilson. "But I do think for many people this is a relatively new concept to think about, in terms of looking at the situation and the potential impact, and then being able to do something about it."

Wilson is the section head of pediatric hospital medicine at Children's Hospital Colorado, and an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. The findings are set for Sunday presentation at the annual meeting of the Pediatric Academic Societies, in Boston.

The survey focused on the experiences of 323 nationally representative respondents, and was conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics Julius B. Richmond Center of Excellence, an advocacy group aimed at safeguarding children from cigarettes and secondhand smoke.

The researchers surveyed apartment residents whose own homes had been smoke-free for a minimum of three months. All the participants were drawn from a larger 2011 Social Climate Survey.

They were asked about their building's smoking restrictions; family composition; where they smelled secondhand smoke and how often.

Among those who reported smelling secondhand smoke, 38 percent said it happened weekly and 12 percent said they noticed the smell daily.

Nonsmoking residents were more likely to indicate that the smell of secondhand smoke was an issue in common areas if they had children: 41 percent of respondents with children reported some degree of public area smoke incursion, compared with 26 percent of childless residents.

Households with children were less likely to report such smoke incursions within their own unit: 34 percent vs. 60 percent among childless residents.

The survey found that those whose housing costs were underwritten to some degree by government subsidies were also

more likely to report smoke incursion.

Building regulations only seemed to have an appreciable impact on secondhand smoke if they involved total bans, the survey found. Smoke-free buildings had lower rates of common-area smoking incursion than those with no restrictions. By contrast, secondhand smoke smells in public spaces was as much of a problem in buildings featuring common-area-only bans as they were in buildings featuring no restrictions whatsoever.

"We clearly saw that a total ban is much more effective than a partial ban," Wilson noted. "And with that I would say that while I absolutely support moves to ban smoking in the workplace, at the very least adults have some choice in the matter in terms of their being able to leave a job or go somewhere else if they come into a work environment where smoking is still allowed. Children in the home, however, do not have that choice."

"Parents need to advocate and speak up, and say 'I don't want my children to be exposed while they're sleeping, doing their homework or playing at home,'" she added. "And they should ask their landlord about smoking regulations in any apartment building they're considering before they move in."

For her part, one advocate said that the issue of smoking incursion in apartment dwellings complements her organization's prime focus "to get smoke-free indoor air everywhere we can."

"We certainly think that residents have an absolutely legitimate right to at least know whether they are going to be exposed to this kind of health risk when they are considering moving into an apartment," said Marie Cocco, a spokeswoman for the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. "Because we know that secondhand smoke is a deadly substance that contains more than 7,000 chemicals, 69 of which, at least, cause cancer."

Cocco said her organization has publicly endorsed measures, such as the one recently unveiled by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, which would require multi-dwelling apartment buildings to fully disclose their smoking policy to all prospective renters and buyers.

"The Surgeon General has clearly [described secondhand smoke risks such as] lung cancer and heart disease among adults, and respiratory and ear infections and asthma among babies and children," she added.

Because this study was presented at a medical meeting, the data and conclusions should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

SOURCES: Karen M. Wilson, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, section head, pediatric hospital medicine, Children's Hospital Colorado, and assistant professor, pediatrics, University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver; Marie Cocco, spokeswoman, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Washington D.C.; April 29, 2102, presentation, Pediatric Academic Societies meeting, Boston

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