Secondhand smoke may trigger asthma attacks

Q. I have a son with asthma. His dad thinks our son is only at risk for an asthma attack when someone is directly smoking in front of him. I believe if he walks in a house or gets in a car where someone has been regularly smoking, it can still cause an asthma attack. Which is true?

A. Exposure to secondhand smoke greatly increases a child's risk of developing asthma and also makes a child who already has asthma experience more frequent and severe attacks.

Secondhand smoke contains hundreds of chemicals known to be toxic or cancer-causing, including formaldehyde, benzene, vinyl chloride, arsenic, ammonia, and hydrogen cyanide. Studies have shown that children exposed to secondhand smoke are at higher risk for sudden infant death syndrome, pneumonia and ear infections.

The Centers for Disease Control has a number of useful articles and statistics about asthma, secondhand smoke.

Reactions to smoke may vary. In some children, the reaction to cigarette smoke is obvious (they begin having symptoms soon after exposure). In others, it is more subtle — it simply "fans the flames" of the inflammation in the airways, making preventive medications less effective, and turning the child into a "sitting duck" for the next asthma trigger she combats. Negative effects can occur even after only brief exposure to secondhand smoke.

Attempting to stop a child's exposure to secondhand smoke by smoking in a different room doesn't work. Heating and air conditioning systems distribute the smoke throughout the house. As some have noted, having a "smoking section" of the house is a little like having a "peeing section" of the swimming pool.

And air filters can't remove smoke or its toxins. Air cleaning systems and filters can remove large particles of grime, but not the smaller particles and harmful gases from secondhand smoke. They don't "clean the air" after the smoker has stopped smoking; the smoke hangs around for long periods of time.

The only smoke-free environment is an environment where there is no smoking.

Tags: asthma, Elizabeth D. Allen, smoking