TAP 5

TOBACCO ACTION PACK

passive SMOKING

Passive smoking happens when people breathe in the smoke that drifts off the end of a burning cigarette, or is blown out by a smoker. As we have seen from TAP 4, it has been known for many years that smoking causes disease among smokers. More recently, scientists have found proof that passive smoking can also be harmful to health.

Passive smoking has turned smoking into an issue that concerns everyone, not just smokers. This TAP unit outlines the health problems that passive smoking can cause, and looks at some of the issues that have come up since medical evidence has shown that it is a risk to health.

What does the passive smoker breathe in?

Someone who happens to be near a smoker breathes in a mixture of smoke that is often called environmental tobacco smoke, or ETS. When a cigarette is smoked, three different kinds of smoke are made:

* Mainstream smoke
* Exhaled mainstream smoke
* Sidestream smoke

Mainstream smoke is the smoke directly inhaled through the burning cigarette by the smoker. Exhaled mainstream smoke is the smoke breathed out by the smoker from their lungs. These two types of smoke are different, because some of the chemicals in the inhaled smoke will stay in the smoker's body, or be changed by the process of being breathed in and out. The last kind of smoke is called sidestream smoke, the smoke that drifts from the end of the lit cigarette. ETS is made up of exhaled mainstream smoke and sidestream smoke.

Although mainstream and sidestream smoke both contain many cancer-causing chemicals and other poisons, sidestream smoke carries many of these chemicals in far greater amounts. For example, sidestream smoke contains more ammonia, benzene, carbon monoxide, nicotine and the cancer-causing chemicals 2-napthylamine, 4-aminobiphenyl, N-nitrosamine, benz[a]anthracene and benzo-pyrene per milligram of tobacco burned. The particles of sidestream smoke are smaller than those of mainstream smoke, meaning that they can be inhaled more deeply into the lungs.[1]

Although sidestream smoke contains many dangerous chemicals, it is important to remember that passive smoking is less harmful than active smoking. This is because the smoke becomes diluted in the air, and so is less concentrated by the time it reaches other people. Just how much ETS is breathed in by the non-smoker depends on a number of factors, including: how many cigarettes are burning at a time; how close the non-smoker is to the source of the smoke and the size and ventilation of the area.[2] Of course, active smokers are exposed to environmental tobacco smoke as well.

Health risks of passive smoking

It is well known that being around cigarette smoke can make your eyes water, and irritate the nose and throat.[1] But passive smoking can cause serious health problems as well.

For children

The first evidence that passive smoking caused any health damage was recorded 20 years ago, when research showed that children whose parents smoked were more likely to get chest infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia, and to go to hospital with these problems.[3,4,5] More recent medical research has also shown that children living with people who smoke are more likely to get asthma, have increased episodes and more severe attacks of asthma,[7] and have lungs that develop less well.[1]

For adults

As well as irritating the breathing passages, passive smoking is now known to be a cause of lung cancer[1,7] and heart disease[8,9,10,11] in adult non-smokers. It has been estimated that every year, lung cancer caused by passive smoking kills around 146 people,[12] and heart disease caused by passive smoking kills about 1,400 people.[13]

A public health problem

The health risks of passive smoking mean that smoking can no longer be considered a health issue for smokers alone. Because smoking is widespread in the community, it is now considered to be a public health problem.

Court cases

Australian courts have supported the view that passive smoking can harm health. After looking at a large amount of medical and scientific evidence, the Federal Court of Australia ruled, in February 1991, that passive smoking causes lung cancer, asthma attacks, and chest and airways problems in children.[14] The case was substantially upheld on appeal.[15] Even before that important decision, there had already been a number of cases in Australia where people claimed that passive smoking damaged their health.[16,17]

Solutions

There is no doubt that passive smoking causes harm, and that Australian law courts agree. What does this mean for organisations and workplaces? Or for public places like restaurants and pubs, or bus and airport terminals, or hospitals?

The answer lies in the introduction of smoking bans or restrictions. Of course there are some places where smoking has not been allowed for a long time. These include places where food is prepared, and areas where chemicals are stored which are highly inflammable. Public enclosed places like theatres and cinemas have banned smoking because of fire safety. Smoking is not allowed on most forms of public transport, including domestic aircraft and in some states, taxi-cabs.

Under state law, employers must provide a safe workplace for workers, and for visitors to that workplace. This means that more and more workplaces are now banning or at least restricting smoking. You can read more about this in TAP 9.

Stopping smoking in public places and at work doesn't mean that people are not allowed to smoke at all. What bans and restrictions mean is that smoking has been recognised as a risk to the health of all people, and that people working in and visiting these places have the right to breathe in smokefree air.

Passive Smoking - Activities

1. Conduct a survey in your local community about attitudes to passive smoking.

Do you find any differences between the attitudes of smokers and non-smokers, men and women, adults and children?

2. Public areas have a range of rules about smoking. Choose three in your community and find out about rules that apply to them.

Some examples of places you could choose from are a hospital, a police station, a bank, the library, the community hall, the local swimming pool, restaurants, theatres, cinemas and shopping centres.

3. How do you think people could better understand the risks of passive smoking? Create a plan and try it out.

4. What sorts of things can non-smokers do to reduce their exposure to passive smoke?

5. Find some newspaper articles on court cases on passive smoking and consider the following:

* What information was relevant to seeking damages?

* What impact could the decision have on other employer groups when it comes to smoking in the workplace?

* What responsibilities do you think employers have in safeguarding the health of their workers?

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