

## FACT SHEET

### ASTHMA & TOBACCO SMOKE

### Pennsylvania Chapter

#### Facts about Asthma and Tobacco Smoke

- Tobacco smoke is the number one poison in childhood.
- Asthma is the most common chronic illness in childhood.
- Together they create a very serious health concern for children.

Children who breathe secondhand smoke have more asthma attacks. Each year smoking or secondhand smoke cause one million attacks of asthma and 26,000 new cases of asthma.

Why is tobacco smoke so harmful for individuals with asthma? Asthma is a lung disease that occurs in people with sensitive airways. The airways react faster and stronger to things that irritate them. When someone inhales pollution or fumes, the airways normally contract or clamp down to protect the lungs from a harmful substance. The airways will relax as the lungs become accustomed to this irritant, but the irritant will now travel deeper into the lungs to cause more damage.

Asthma is a lung disease that is triggered by something that irritates sensitive airways and causes them to contract. When the sensitive airways try to relax, they go into spasm and start to open and close repeatedly. Over time, this causes swelling of the airways which leads to all of the asthma symptoms: cough, wheeze and shortness of breath. Tobacco smoke not only causes the airways to contract, but it also burns the airways from the heat and chemicals in the cigarette. Smoking causes lung cancer, a leading and preventable cause of death in the nation. There is no reason to expose anyone to this harmful substance.

Smoke is an avoidable asthma trigger. Without smoke exposure, a person with asthma will experience fewer sick days. Often children with asthma will become symptom-free and be able to reduce or stop their asthma medication when they are no longer exposed to smoke in the air they breathe.

Children with asthma have no control over their environments. As a parent, guardian, or caregiver you need to protect children from exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. You can keep your child's environment smoke-free.

Consult your American Lung Association or American Cancer Society on smoking cessation programs and additional information on secondhand smoke.

**Written by:** Frances C. Gross, DO, FAAP - 1998

**Reviewed by:** Susan S. Aronson, MD, FAAP 11-04

