

Smokers' Kids Don't Get a Break in Cars

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Most parents who smoke don't make strong efforts to protect their kids from it in the car, a trial-based survey showed.

Less than a third reported having a policy of keeping the car smoke-free, said Jonathan Winickoff, MD, MPH, of Massachusetts General Hospital for Children in Boston, and colleagues.

Nearly half of those who had no such policy said they smoked with their child in the car, the group reported in the December issue of *Pediatrics*.

While there is "no safe level of exposure" to tobacco smoke, secondhand smoke inside a vehicle is especially problematic.

"Studies have shown that smoking one cigarette in a confined space such as inside a car creates unsafe levels of respiratory suspended particles," Winickoff's group pointed out.

Rolling the window down doesn't help much. One experiment showed that air quality was still as bad as in a smoky bar, and that residual toxins remain on surfaces in the car even when a cigarette isn't actively lit.

Aside from raising their risk of cancer, exposure contributes to children's risk of lower respiratory infections, sudden infant death syndrome, and ear infections as well as worsening asthma.

The researchers examined exit interviews with smokers who served as controls as part of the larger Clinical Effort Against Secondhand Smoke Exposure, a pediatric office-based intervention trial.

Among the 795 parents with a car who were interviewed, 73% said they or someone else had smoked in the car in the prior 3 months. The researchers reported that of the 562 parents who did not have a smoke-free car policy, 48% smoked in the car when their children were present.

Fewer than one in three parents (29%) reported having a smoke-free car policy. Only 24% reported having a strictly enforced (no tobacco in the prior 3 months) smoke-free car policy.

By comparison, 57% of the parents reported having a strictly enforced policy of no smoking in the home.

Smoke-free cars tended to go along with smoke-free homes, as 82% of smokers with a strictly-enforced car policy stuck to such a strategy at home too.

However, the association didn't go the other direction. Most parents (66%) who kept their kids from being exposed in the home didn't do so for the car, "suggesting that parents may not recognize tobacco smoke exposure in cars as an important exposure source for their children."

Conversations with pediatricians on the topic appeared to be uncommon.

Although about one in five parents reported having been asked about their smoking status, just 14% had been asked about whether smoking was allowed in their vehicle, and 12% were advised to have



Action Points

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Note that after adjustment for other factors, smokers with an infant under 1 year of age and lighter smokers (≤ 10 cigarettes per day) were significantly more likely to have a strict no smoking in the car policy.

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After adjustment for other factors, smokers with an infant under 1 year of age were 64% more likely to have a strict no smoking in the car policy.

Lighter smokers (≤ 10 cigarettes per day) were substantially more likely to forgo smoking in the car, with an adjusted odds ratio of 3.59. However, having more than one smoker in the home lowered the chances of a strictly enforced smoke-free car policy by 44%, with an aOR of 0.56.

"Childhood tobacco smoke exposure in confined spaces should be considered an intervention priority in the pediatric setting because children's exposure to tobacco smoke is involuntary, and no one other than the child's healthcare provider may have the opportunity to advocate for smoke-free cars," the researchers concluded.

They cautioned that the study results were based on self-reporting that may have been subject to recall and response bias and without implying causality.

The trial was supported by a grant from NCI, by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

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The researchers reported having no conflicts of interest.

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