Secondhand Smoke

What is secondhand smoke?
Secondhand smoke, also called environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), is the mixture of smoke from burning tobacco products and smoke that is exhaled by someone who is smoking. Exposure to secondhand smoke can lead to disease and premature death in those who do not smoke.

What is the impact of secondhand smoke?
There is no safe level of secondhand smoke exposure. Secondhand smoke itself has been classified as a known human carcinogen or cancer-causing agent. Nearly 70 of the 4,000 chemicals released during secondhand smoking are known to cause cancer.

Secondhand smoke exposure is the third leading cause of preventable death in the United States. It is responsible for approximately 3,400 lung cancer deaths and about 46,000 heart disease deaths among people who do not smoke each year.

ETS exposure can trigger respiratory symptoms and cause asthma exacerbations. Children who are continuously exposed may develop asthma or experience asthma symptoms, and are also at increased risk for ear infections, lower respiratory infections and overall decreased lung function. Infants who are exposed to secondhand smoke are also at risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). According to the California Environmental Protection Agency, second-hand smoke can be implicated in over 400 SIDS deaths each year.

How common is exposure to secondhand smoke?
Most exposure to secondhand smoke occurs in homes and workplaces. In the U.S., more than 126 million people who don't smoke are also exposed to ETS in vehicles and other public places. About 25% of children younger than 11 live in homes where at least one smoker resides. Making your home smoke-free can significantly reduce exposure to secondhand smoke and is one of the most important steps you can take for the health of your children and family.

What is being done about secondhand smoke exposure?
Hundreds of cities and counties in the U.S. have already passed smoke-free air laws, and the numbers continue to grow. Smoke-free laws benefit everyone, and are not hurtful to businesses, as evidence shows. Effective January 1, 2008, Illinois became the 22nd state to pass smoke-free legislation.