

Protect kids from second-hand smoke in cars

The Lung Association calls on Canadians to take action

When Dr. Alan Kaplan hears debate about whether smoking should be banned in cars carrying children, he thinks about a young patient of his – a little boy with asthma.

Strangely, the boy didn't have any breathing problems during the week. But on weekends his asthma would worsen – and by Sunday night he'd have trouble breathing. It was a pattern that was repeated almost every week.

What triggered this recurring problem? It didn't take long to figure out. The boy's parents were separated and he would spend the school week with his mother. On Fridays, the father would pick up his son by car and smoke all the way back to his home, a 35-minute drive away, where he also smoked indoors.

“Now if a smoking ban in cars was in place, it would have at least protected that child during car rides,” says Dr. Kaplan, a family physician.

That little boy is just one reason why Dr. Kaplan supports a ban on smoking in cars with children. He's not alone.

The majority of Canadians (82 per cent) say they support a ban on smoking in vehicles with children younger than 18 years of age, according to a recent national poll. More than two-thirds of smokers (69 per cent) say they support a ban, too.

“We should not allow children to be exposed to a substance that makes healthy children sick and sick children sicker,” says Nora Sobolov, president of the Canadian Lung Association.

Across the country, people are talking about smoking bans in cars carrying children. Last fall, the town of Wolfville, Nova Scotia became the first town to ban on smoking in cars carrying children under age 18. The government of Nova Scotia soon followed, passing its own province-wide ban. Since then, private member bills and motions have been introduced in provincial and territorial governments in the Yukon, British Columbia and Ontario.

In the United States, bans have also been passed in: California; Arkansas; Louisiana; Bangor, Maine; Keyport, New Jersey; and Rockland County. South Australia has also recently taken action to protect children from the dangers of second-hand smoke.

Tobacco smoke is a dangerous mix of more than 4,000 dangerous chemicals. Because the space inside cars is small, second-hand smoke is more concentrated. The poisons in smoke can reach very high levels in a short amount of time.

Babies and children are especially vulnerable to the poisons in tobacco smoke because they breathe more quickly and take in more harmful chemicals for their size than adults

A 2006 study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine found that exposure to second-hand smoke in a car for just ten seconds can cause asthmatic episodes in children.

Children who are regularly exposed to second-hand smoke have:

- Higher risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- More cough and wheeze than children of non-smokers
- More severe asthma than children of non-smokers
- More ear infections
- Slowed lung growth
- Double the risk of bronchitis, croup and pneumonia
- Lower test scores in math, reading and logic
- Higher risk for heart disease
- More chances of taking up smoking themselves

There is no safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke. Even brief exposures can be harmful.

Detractors of banning smoking in cars say that their civil liberties are being trampled on. But Dr. Kaplan counters that argument with: "Who's looking after the children's civil liberties? Children are held captive in car seats in their parents' cars, where they are forced to endure significant levels of second-hand smoke."

"Babies and children are powerless to protect themselves from this risk. But we are not," says Sobolov.

The Lung Association has launched a campaign to help Canadians act now on this important public-health issue. By visiting www.cleanairforkids.ca, Canadians can send an email message directly to their provincial or territorial representative, health minister or premier.

"As parents or grandparents, health-care professionals, educators, caregivers, business owners and community leaders, we all should be concerned about this major public health risk," says Sobolov. "We must act now to protect our children."