



Girls and boys for change: tobacco control now



Women and second-hand smoke

A major problem

Second-hand smoke is a mixture of the smoke from the burning tip of a cigarette and the smoke exhaled by a smoker. It causes lung cancer in non-smokers and increases the risk of coronary heart disease. Although the majority of smokers are men, many women and children are affected by their second-hand smoke. Worldwide, second-hand smoke causes an estimated 600 000 premature deaths a year, the majority (64%) among women. In many countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, many young people live in homes that are not smoke-free and are exposed to second-hand smoke in public places.

The risks to health from second-hand smoke

Non-smokers who live with smokers are at increased risk of smoking-related illnesses. For example:

- Women whose male partners smoke have increased rates of lung cancer and increased risk of coronary heart disease.
- Parents who smoke may harm their infant children by increasing the risk of low birth weight, sudden infant death syndrome, reduced physical development and childhood cancer.
- Exposure to second-hand smoke results in respiratory illnesses, chronic respiratory symptoms (such as asthma), ear infections and reduced lung function in children. Children of smoking mothers have more episodes of respiratory illness and there is a clear link between smoking in the home and the hospital admission of children for pneumonia and bronchitis.

Protection against second-hand smoke

There is no safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke. Women and children need to be protected from second-hand smoke exposure within the home, at school and in the workplace. However, women often do not have the power to negotiate smoke-free spaces, even within their own homes. Protection can be greatly furthered through smoking bans at national level that adhere to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (Article 8 and its guidelines). To protect against second-hand smoke:

- Women must be empowered with information on their right to breathe tobacco-free clean air.
- Women need to be better informed of the hazards of second-hand smoke to themselves, their foetuses, their children and other family members.
- Smokers must take responsibility for not exposing others to their second-hand smoke.
- All workplaces, public transport, schools and health services should be made smoke-free.



**World Health
Organization**

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