

# Smoke-free apartments healthy for children

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VISTA COMMUNITY CLINIC

Over the last 20 years, smoking rates in California have declined as people have become aware of the dangers of secondhand smoke and have embraced policies that make their environments healthier. This includes bans on smoking in indoor places such as workplaces, restaurants and bars. More recently, amusement parks, sporting venues, hospitals, beaches, parks, and cars with children under the age of 18 have also been added to the list of places that limit smoking. All of these decisions have reduced the rate of smoking in California but more work needs to be done.

The biggest secondhand smoke threat to children's health remains right where they live: multi-unit housing developments. In California, nearly 11 million people (34 percent) live in multi-unit housing and a large number of these residents are children. Secondhand smoke can drift into nearby apartments from stairs, balconies, patios, courtyards and through open windows, shared ventilation systems, and gaps around plumbing, ductwork and electrical wiring. Ventilation systems only reduce the odor of smoke and do not remove the tobacco carcinogens from the air.

Secondhand smoke is especially harmful to kids because their lungs are still developing and they breathe in more smoke in proportion to their body size. Children under the age of 5 spend the majority of their time at home. If they live in an apartment, they are at greater risk for exposure to secondhand smoke when a smoker lives next door. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, secondhand smoke

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can cause asthma in preschool aged children and increases the risk for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Infants and children younger than 6 who are regularly exposed to secondhand smoke are at increased risk of lower respiratory track infections, such as pneumonia and bronchitis.

Another more obvious danger to children is fire. Cigarettes are the number one cause of home fires in the United States. Not surprisingly, smoking materials are twice as likely to be the cause of fires in apartments compared with one- and two-family homes.

Multi-unit housing developments are going smoke-free to protect the health of their residents. This trend is sweeping the nation; public health groups are at work on this issue in California, Michigan, Oregon, Maine, Colorado and Washington.

Smoke-free policies are very popular among apartment residents. A statewide survey commissioned in 2004 by the American Lung Association of California showed that approximately 82 percent of California apartment residents polled would prefer to live in a totally nonsmoking apartment building, or at least in the nonsmoking section. According to the same survey, 83 percent indicated that if the apartment building became smoke-free, there are places nearby that people could use to smoke, such as sidewalks or parking lots. Another survey conducted in 2006 among Latino renters concluded that 95 percent would prefer to live in an apartment building where smoking is not allowed anywhere or where there are separate smoking and nonsmoking sections.

This concept is also popular with California voters. A poll conducted in November 2008 of 600 registered voters revealed that 78 percent would support a requirement that apartment buildings offer nonsmoking sections and 70 percent thought that a person moving into an apartment should be told if the tenant next door smokes. Clearly these results support, at the very least, the option of choosing to live in a nonsmoking section of apartments.

Despite all of the advances made in preventing secondhand smoke exposure California's children are still at risk in their very own home. California voters and residents alike believe that smoke-free policies and offering a choice of nonsmoking apartment buildings are ideas worth considering. Smoke-free apartment policies can lead to safer and more productive lives for all, especially California's children.

For more details, visit [www.northcoastalprevention-coalition.org/muhhome.html](http://www.northcoastalprevention-coalition.org/muhhome.html).

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