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Physicians urge avoiding “thirdhand smoke”

NEWS RELEASE

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It is widely known that smoking and secondhand smoke cause health problems ranging from cancer to birth defects, but recent studies have revealed a more covert threat from smoking, one most people are not aware of. This threat has been dubbed “thirdhand smoke,” and it refers to the residual build up of chemicals in cigarette smoke that coats walls, furniture, carpeting, clothing, etc., in places where people smoke.

This health threat joins a considerable list of reasons the clinics of the U.P. Association of Rural Health Services are promoting the “Be A Quitter! Stop Smoking” message again this November. The association owns and operates eight clinics in locations throughout the Upper Peninsula. This effort to urge people to quit smoking is held in conjunction with the Great American SmokeOut, the national one-day smoking cessation campaign, which is Thursday, Nov. 17.



“Thirdhand smoke” refers to a buildup of chemicals in cigarette smoke that coats walls, furniture, carpeting, clothing, etc., in areas where people smoke. In order to protect others from this potential threat, doctors urge smokers to take cigarette smoking completely outside of the home.

Dr. Max Allen, a physician of the association, said, “We know smoking causes health problems for smokers and others exposed to secondhand smoke. Now, there’s growing evidence that the smoke particles that settle on surfaces are hazardous too.”

In 2006 the surgeon general's report stated there is no risk-free level of tobacco exposure. Some 250 poisonous toxins have been identified in cigarette smoke, including arsenic, lead, cyanide and benzene.

Researchers have discovered that chemicals in the residue from cigarette smoke can be transmitted to people through the skin by direct contact with contaminated surfaces, or simply by breathing the air in a home where the residue particles have become airborne once again.

In an online article for the Mayo Clinic published earlier this year, staff physician Dr. Lowell Dale wrote that smoke residue reacts with common indoor pollutants to create a "toxic mix" of cancer-causing substances posing a potential threat to anyone exposed to it.

Dr. Allen said children, and some pets, would be at high risk for such exposure.

"Babies and small children tend to crawl and play on floors. They're more likely to touch and put their mouths on surfaces coated with this chemical residue. The developing brain of a child is highly susceptible to toxins, even at low levels," he said.

Studies have shown that thirdhand smoke cannot be eliminated by attempting to air out rooms or limiting smoking to only one room in the house.

"Take all smoking completely outside and also make your car a smoke-free zone," Dr. Allen advises. "The best thing to do is quit smoking entirely. Until then you can do these things to protect others' health."

During November the clinics of the U.P. Association of Rural Health Services will distribute bumper stickers promoting the "Be A Quitter! Stop Smoking" message. The clinics include: Dickinson-Iron Dental Center, Crystal Falls; Ewen Medical-Dental Center, Ewen; Marquette Alger Community Health Center, Marquette, Northern Menominee Health Center, Spalding; Northern Menominee Health Center South, Menominee; Quincy Hill Community Health Center, Hancock; Sawyer Dental Center, Gwinn; and the West Mackinac Dental Clinic, Engadine. For more information visit www.upruralhealth.org and www.cancer.org/Healthy/StayAwayfromTobacco.

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