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Sue Ann Says: Smoke-Free Wisconsin Is Good for Our Children

As I write this column, there are 38 days, 13 hours, 57 minutes, 33...32...31 seconds until all of Wisconsin's workspaces go smoke-free on July 5, 2010. It's time for us to celebrate the passage of the Smoke-Free Air law...because our babies and toddlers depend on it.

Now, you might be saying, "What do you mean babies and toddlers; why would smoke free workspaces be good for our children?"

Plenty.

The Smoke-Free Law Will Reduce Secondhand Smoke

Everyone can be exposed to secondhand smoke in public places, such as hotels, restaurants, shopping centers, public transportation, schools, and daycare centers. Public places where children go are a special area of concern. Did you know that on average, children are exposed to more secondhand smoke than nonsmoking adults? According to the Surgeon General, there is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure. Even brief exposures can be harmful.

The American Cancer Society says secondhand smoke is responsible for:

- 150,000 to 300,000 lung infections (such as pneumonia and bronchitis) in children younger than 18 months of age, which result in 7,500 to 15,000 hospitalizations annually
- Increases in the number and severity of asthma attacks in about 200,000 to 1 million children who have asthma
- More than 750,000 middle ear infections in children
- Respiratory symptoms like coughing, phlegm, wheezing and breathlessness in school aged children

Pregnant women exposed to secondhand smoke are also at increased risk of having low birth-weight babies, and babies exposed to secondhand smoke after birth are more likely to die from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) than babies who are not exposed to cigarette smoke.

Same for Third-hand Smoke

Ever smell someone after they've come in from a smoke? It's not just stinky – it's dangerous – and it's called third-hand smoke. Perhaps you haven't heard about this relatively new concept of third-hand smoke, but you should know that there is not much difference between it and secondhand smoke where a child's health is concerned. Third-hand smoke is the toxic brew of residue left after the cigarette has been extinguished. It's found on the clothes, skin and hair of a smoker, and on the furniture, floor, walls, draperies, bedding, and baby toys in a home where smoking occurs. Non-smokers exposed to secondhand smoke in public spaces bring home third-hand smoke toxins – thank goodness that won't be the case anymore.

Children's immature immune systems may mistake components of smoke for dangerous germs and attack them which begin the inflammatory process that results in bronchitis or asthma. Other components may interfere with development of the nervous system. Plus, babies who are crawling and mouthing things have a higher risk of exposure. Imagine your child sucking cancer causing carcinogens off their rattle...icky!

The danger is believing your child is free of the hazards of smoke if no visible smoke is present where the child is – and that just isn't so. The best way to minimize the risk of third-hand smoke is not to smoke and to keep your child away from homes and other spaces where smoking occurs. And as hard as it may be, keep them away from people who smoke.

I encourage you to visit the Wisconsin Is Better Smoke-Free web site, wisconsinbettersmokefree.com to learn more about the state's smoke-free air law, read business success stories, and see the countdown...38 days, 9 hours, 12 minutes... We can all appreciate the right we've been granted to breath clean air.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...and baby!

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.