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Contact: Lisa Esposito

hbns-editor@cfah.org

[Center for the Advancement of Health](#)

Workers in no-smoking restaurants show lower carcinogen levels

Recent research on the dangers of secondhand smoke could help clear the air about the value of no-smoking laws governing bars and eateries.

A new study compares the level of a tobacco-specific carcinogen in nonsmokers who work in restaurants that allow smoking with that of employees in restaurants that ban it.

Restaurant workers exposed to tobacco smoke on the job were more likely to have a detectable level of NNK, a carcinogen implicated in the development of lung cancer, than those who worked in tobacco-free environments.

Where are no studies showing any safe level of exposure to this potent lung carcinogen,' said lead author Michael J. Stark, Ph.D. In addition to NNK, secondhand smoke contains more than 50 other carcinogens and a host of other toxic substances that cause lung cancer, various other cancers, heart disease and lung disease.'

Stark is the principal investigator for the Multnomah County Health Department and Oregon Department of Human Services. The study appears online and in the August 2007 issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

Nonsmokers exposed to secondhand smoke have about a 20 percent increase in the risk of lung cancer and foodservice workers tend to have more exposure to indoor environmental tobacco smoke than workers do in any other occupation.

Clean indoor act laws already protect about 70 percent of workers from indoor environmental smoke. Yet, only 11 states have clean indoor air acts that ban smoking in all indoor workplaces. In states like Oregon, where the study took place, workplaces such as restaurants and bars have exemptions.

The researchers concluded that there is no justification for any clean air exemptions. Policymakers and the public need to protect the health of all nonsmoking workers by prohibiting smoking in all indoor workplaces, Stark said.

Restaurant patrons who smoke might be in denial about the dangers of secondhand smoke, said Bruce Leistikow, M.D., an epidemiologist with the department of public health sciences, University of California Davis Cancer Center. They think they underestimate the effects on themselves and thereby on others. The risks are so high that absent tobacco-industry lobbying and disinformation, secondhand smoke exposure would already be banned in all states.

According to Elaine Fraser, of the Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, there has been no successful national effort at banning smoking in the workplace but grassroots efforts, which research results strengthen, are slowly making a difference at the state and local levels.

Because of these efforts, the antismoking groups believe they are having a positive effect on changing the policies of the relatively small number of businesses that do not have a smoke-free work policy, OSHA's Fraser said.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Health Behavior News Service: Lisa Esposito at (202) 387-2829 or hbns-editor@cfah.org.

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Stark MJ, et al. The impact of clean indoor air exemptions and preemption on the prevalence of a tobacco-specific lung carcinogen among nonsmoking bar and restaurant workers. Am J Public Health 97(8), 2007.
