

No. 71

December 7, 2005 (MPL/JR)

Secondhand Smoke a Danger to Health – Germany Must Take Action

German Cancer Research Center presents a new study

Tobacco smoke in enclosed spaces is not simply a nuisance: it is a threat to health with fatal consequences. This is the conclusion reached by the German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ) in its latest publication.

“Secondhand smoke contains not only poisons such as hydrocyanic acid, ammonia, and carbon monoxide, but also numerous carcinogenic substances including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, *N*-nitrosamines, aromatic amines, benzene, vinyl chloride, arsenic, cadmium, chromium and the radioactive isotope polonium 210,” states Dr. Martina Pötschke-Langer, the editor of the publication. “For the carcinogenic substances contained in secondhand smoke it is impossible to determine threshold values under which no health risk is to be expected. Even the slightest exposure can contribute to the development of tumors.”

In Germany, the level of pollution due to tobacco smoke is considerable: Each year more than 170,000 newborn babies have already been exposed in the womb to the harmful substances contained in tobacco smoke, and an estimated 8 million or more children and teenagers under 18 years old live in a household with at least one smoker. Among the adult population, more than 35 million nonsmokers are forced to inhale the harmful substances contained in secondhand smoke – at home, at work, or in their leisure time. At the workplace alone, about 8.5 million nonsmokers are still exposed to secondhand smoke.

Secondhand smoke irritates the respiratory tract and can lead to breathlessness during physical activity, increased susceptibility to infection, headaches and dizziness. Even a short exposure can elicit these symptoms. However, secondhand smoke is also a contributory factor in the causation of chronic and fatal diseases.

The joint authors of the study, the epidemiologists Professor Dr. Ulrich Keil of the University of Muenster and Professor Dr. Heiko Becher of Heidelberg University made the first ever calculation of the annual number of fatalities in Germany due to secondhand smoke: “Every year, secondhand smoke causes the deaths of an estimated 2140 nonsmokers due to coronary heart disease, 770 nonsmokers due to stroke, 50 nonsmokers due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and 260 nonsmokers due to lung cancer. Approximately 60 infants die each year as a result of secondhand smoke in the household or from prenatal exposure to harmful substances, because the mother smoked during pregnancy,” explain Ulrich Keil and Heiko Becher.

The two epidemiologists emphasize: “In Germany, more than 3300 nonsmokers probably die each year as a consequence of exposure to secondhand smoke. This is a larger number of fatalities than the annual toll from illegal drugs, asbestos, BSE and SARS combined.”

Secondhand smoke is also a contributory factor in the occurrence of numerous non-fatal cases of coronary heart disease, stroke, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Dr. Martina Pötschke-Langer considers the present level of exposure of nonsmokers to tobacco smoke in Germany as unacceptable. In view of the estimated 3300 or more annual deaths and the countless persons who are ill because of secondhand smoke, it is urgent that a federal bill be introduced to ensure comprehensive protection of nonsmokers in public premises, including restaurants. An information campaign in Germany, drawing attention to the dangers of secondhand smoke would also contribute to reducing the number of victims. Germany needs to take action!

The publication "Passivrauchen - ein unterschätztes Gesundheitsrisiko" ("Secondhand smoke – an underestimated health risk") was authored by scientists from the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), Heidelberg, the Institute for Epidemiology and Social Medicine of the University of Muenster, and the Hygiene Institute of the Heidelberg University Hospital. It can be obtained as a pdf file from www.tabakkontrolle.de and in printed form from:

Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum
WHO Collaborative Center for Tobacco Control
Fax: +49 6221 42 30 20
or by e-mail: who-cc@dkfz.de

The task of the Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum in Heidelberg (German Cancer Research Center, DKFZ) is to systematically investigate the mechanisms of cancer development and to identify cancer risk factors. The results of this basic research are expected to lead to new approaches in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer. The Center is financed to 90 percent by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and to 10 percent by the State of Baden-Wuerttemberg. It is a member of the Helmholtz Association of National Research Centers (Helmholtz-Gemeinschaft Deutscher Forschungszentren e.V.).

This press release is available at www.dkfz.de/pressemitteilungen

Dr. Julia Rautenstrauch
Division of Press and Public Relations
Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum
Im Neuenheimer Feld 280
D-69120 Heidelberg
T: +49 6221 42 2854
F: +49 6221 42 2968