

Kids who live with smokers miss school more often

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - New study findings show that fourth-graders who live with at least one smoker are more likely than those who don't to miss school because of a respiratory illness.

Living with more than one smoker further increased the likelihood that kids would call in sick, especially if the child had asthma, according to the report.

These findings indicate that even kids who are old enough to attend school full-time, and therefore spend every weekday away from home, still feel the effects of secondhand smoke, write Dr. Frank Gilliland and colleagues at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

"Thus, although (secondhand smoke) exposure among school-aged children is likely to be substantially lower than that among preschool children, the adverse effects appear to be substantial," they write in the May 15th issue of the American Journal of Epidemiology.

While missing a day of school here and there may appear somewhat harmless, absences can be markers of much larger problems, according to editorialists led by Dr. Anthony J. Alberg of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

"Lurking behind a school absence may lie sleepless nights, physician visits, emergency department visits, hypersomnolence (excessive sleepiness), poor concentration, parents missing work, and poor asthma-specific quality of life," Alberg and his colleagues write.

The current study "adds to the importance of promoting smoking cessation among parents who smoke cigarettes," they add.

Gilliland and his team obtained their findings from information about illness-related absences among 1,932 California fourth-graders.

Parents or guardians reported whether a doctor had ever diagnosed their children with asthma, and how many smokers lived in their households.

Children who lived with at least one smoker were 27 percent more likely to have been absent from school due to respiratory illness than children whose homes were smoke-free.

And the more smokers in the house, the worse off children were, the authors note. Children who lived with at least two smokers were 75 percent more likely than those from non-smoking homes to miss school due to respiratory illness.

Having asthma also made the situation worse, Gilliland and his team write. Children with asthma who lived with smokers were more than twice as likely to stay home because of respiratory illness than non-asthmatic kids from smoke-free households.

In asthmatic kids who lived with at least two smokers, the risk of such absences shot up by more than four-fold.

Gilliland and his colleagues point out that secondhand smoke may help cause or aggravate respiratory infections, or worsen pre-existing asthma.

In the editorial, Alberg and his colleagues suggest that school officials could interpret repeated absences as a sign that a child has undiagnosed asthma, or, if already diagnosed, needs better treatment.