If my partner only smokes outside, can toxic thridhand smoke residue still get inside our cars?

When someone who smoked outside of a car gets into the car, they may bring toxic tobacco smoke with them. Even if you cannot smell it, toxic tobacco residue, called thirdhand smoke, comes into the car on the clothes, skin, hair, and even the exhaled breath of the person who smoked outside. The tobacco smoke odor is not just a nuisance, it is a sign that a mixture of tobacco smoke pollutants—some we can smell and some we cannot—are in the car.

Inside the car, the effect is similar to someone smoking a cigarette inside. The gases and particles in the tobacco residue on the smoker’s clothes, skin, and hair can be transferred, stick to, and ultimately become embedded in the surfaces in the car—the seat covers, steering wheel, floor mats, ceiling liner. The gases and particles can also be released into the air inside the car and accumulate in dust. As a result, passengers are exposed to toxic thirdhand smoke, even though no cigarettes were smoked in it.

To protect yourself from thirdhand smoke, begin by telling your partner about thirdhand smoke. Explain how thirdhand smoke can get into the car even though he smokes outside and remind him that cars contaminated with thirdhand smoke have a lower resale value.

To protect your health and the health of passengers in your car, ask someone who recently smoked to adopt these strategies before getting into your car:

1. Wash their hands and face to remove tobacco residue from their skin.
2. Change into a clean shirt.

Be sure to thank your partner for their efforts to protect you from toxic thirdhand smoke.

Sources


Updated: August 2020