How can I protect my child from the thirdhand smoke left behind by people who smoked in my car?

Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to remove thirdhand smoke once it has become embedded in a car. Even aggressive cleaning will not rid the car of toxic chemicals. Young children are particularly at risk of exposure.

However, there are a few suggestions that may help reduce your child’s exposure if you have reason to believe that a car is polluted with toxic thirdhand smoke:

1. When your child is in a car polluted with thirdhand smoke, turn on the air-conditioning using the “outside air mode”. Make sure you do not simply recirculate the air in your car; this is sometimes the default setting in a car. By bringing outside air into the car using air-conditioning, you will reduce the concentration of thirdhand smoke pollutants in the air of the car.
2. Do not leave the car seat in the car. Put your child’s car seat in the car only when your child will be using it. The less time the car seat is in the car, the less time it will be exposed to toxic thirdhand smoke.
3. Before you put the car seat in the car, put a clean towel under the car seat. The towel will act as a physical barrier between the car’s upholstery, which contains thirdhand smoke pollutants, and the clean car seat.
4. When you are finished using the car seat, remove it and the towel. Wipe the car seat with a solution of diluted vinegar and water and throw the towel into the laundry.
5. As much as possible, limit the amount of time your child is in the car.
6. Because children can absorb thirdhand smoke through their skin, it is a good idea to wash your child’s hands and face when the car ride is completed.

The best way to protect your child from thirdhand smoke exposure in a car is to (1) never ride in cars that have been smoked in, (2) never let anyone smoke in your car, and (3) always ask for a non-smoking rental car—if you smell tobacco odor in the rental car, ask for another.

Sources

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