If I want to avoid thirdhand smoke in my vehicle, what questions should I ask before buying a used car?

Thirdhand smoke builds up in a car just the way it does in any indoor environment. A car, however, is a much smaller space and when passengers smoke the concentration of tobacco smoke chemicals is much higher than in an office or apartment. Relative to its volume, a car's interior contains more materials and surfaces, such as floor carpeting, seat fabrics, upholstery, and ceiling liners, that readily absorb toxic tobacco residue. Added to that, the car interior may be cleaned much less frequently, making it a great place for thirdhand smoke to accumulate.

Before you “sign on the dotted line,” take these steps to help you determine whether or not a prior owner smoked inside the vehicle:

1. Ask about prior smoking in the vehicle
   Actively engage in a discussion about prior smoking in the vehicle. If you are speaking with the owner, you can ask two simple questions:
   1. Did you smoke in this car?
   2. Did you let others smoke in this car?

   Similarly, if you are speaking with a dealer you should ask:
   1. Did you ask the previous owner about smoking?
   2. If not, can you find out if the previous owner was a smoker or allowed smoking?
   3. When you prepared the car for sale, did you notice any smell or other signs of tobacco use?

2. Inspect the vehicle
   Get inside, close the doors and windows, and conduct your own inspection:
   1. First, smell. The odor of stale tobacco smoke means thirdhand smoke has accumulated in the vehicle. It may be covered up by air fresheners and perfumed upholstery cleaners, but it is nearly impossible to remove.
   2. Observe for stains, another sign of thirdhand smoke. Check along the edges of car panels or the ceiling liner for discoloration.
   3. Check the seat covers and flooring for signs of small burns that could indicate accidentally dropped cigarettes or fallen ashes.
   4. It is not uncommon for a seller to use “air fresheners” or fragrances to disguise unpleasant odors. If you smell fragrances in a used car, ask why the seller felt it was necessary to use them.

3. Be cautious of a great deal
   If the price is “too good to be true” it just might be. The resale value is lower for cars that have been smoked in. An owner or dealer might offer a low price in order to move the vehicle quickly.
Sources


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