Does tobacco smoke residue decrease my home’s value?

When people smoke in their homes, the chemicals in tobacco smoke build up over time leaving a toxic thirdhand smoke residue on carpets, furniture, walls, doors, and ceilings. This toxic residue lingers long after the smoke clears, and even after smokers moved out. According to one survey of real estate agents, evidence of thirdhand smoke in a home, such as stale tobacco smell or stains on walls or fabrics, reduces the selling price of a home by as much as 30%. That means if you live in a neighborhood where most homes sell for about $500,000, the home that smells like stale tobacco smoke will sell for around $350,000.

There are three major reasons for this. First, almost everybody hates the smell of stale tobacco smoke. Second, many people immediately experience physical symptoms, such as shortness of breath, headaches, sore throat, or earaches when they smell it. Third, it is very difficult and expensive to remove the underlying toxic thirdhand smoke that causes the smell and physical symptoms that many people experience.

The lower selling price is partly a consequence of fewer people being willing to consider buying a home that smells like stale tobacco smoke. With a smaller pool of buyers willing to buy a home in which someone has smoked, there is no competition to drive the price up. Because real estate agents recognize that they will have to work harder to sell a home with evidence of thirdhand smoke, it may also be more difficult for the seller to find a real estate agent.

While in California the Seller Property Questionnaire (Section M, Question 2, Revised 12/16, 6/18) asks buyers to disclose if any occupant has smoked tobacco on or in the property, this is not the case in many other states. Even without such a disclosure, educated buyers and real estate agents are well aware of the signs of indoor smoking and the challenges of ridding a home of thirdhand smoke. It is not unusual for a potential buyer to ask the seller’s agent about the smoking history of a home, even if there is no odor of stale tobacco smoke. A reputable professional will not lie. An educated buyer will also ask the home inspector if there is evidence of tobacco use. Lastly, an educated buyer knows that the strong smell of air fresheners, scented candles, or the unexpected use of fans may be an attempt to hide stale tobacco smell.

If someone in your household smokes and you are concerned about your home’s value, the first thing to do is get them to stop smoking indoors. That will stop the build-up of thirdhand smoke. The next step is to clean thoroughly all walls; ceilings; carpeting and fabric, such as window treatments; and the heating and air conditioning duct system to try to remove thirdhand smoke from surfaces. Depending on how much thirdhand smoke has accumulated, cleaning may be insufficient and remediation may be required. Remediation could include drastic (and expensive) measures, such as removal and replacement of sheet rock, flooring, and the heating and air conditioning system.
Bottom line: Tobacco smoke residue can significantly decrease your home’s value. To avoid bad news when you sell your home, don’t allow tobacco use or vaping on or in your property. If thirdhand smoke has already accumulated, consult a remediation expert to make necessary repairs and improvements, and disclose the information to your real estate agenda and buyer.

**Sources**


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