Thirdhand Smoke Resource Center

What questions should I ask before signing my next apartment lease?

The Short Answer

Thirdhand smoke is the chemicals left behind when someone smokes tobacco. Thirdhand smoke is unhealthy for people and pets. It can stick around for a long time in homes and cars. It gets into your body if you inhale, swallow, or touch the chemicals. Getting rid of it is really hard and can cost a lot of money.

To avoid thirdhand smoke, your new apartment should be in a smokefree property. If the property formerly allowed smoking, then the unit should be thoroughly cleaned and renovated to remove any thirdhand smoke left by prior residents who smoked.

Before you sign your next lease, ask:

- Where is smoking allowed on the property? Be sure to ask about the units, balconies, porches, and common areas.
- How are tenants informed about the smoking policy?
- What are the consequences if tenants break the policy?
- Are the consequences enforced?
- Have any previous residents smoked in the unit I want to rent?
- If yes, how was the unit cleaned or renovated since they moved out?

The Long Answer

Thirdhand smoke is the chemical residue from tobacco smoke. It is also called “tobacco smoke residue” or “stale tobacco smoke.” The chemicals in thirdhand smoke are toxic to humans, especially children. It can linger for years in dust and on household surfaces. It can also become embedded in carpets, furniture, clothes, and building materials. It is difficult and expensive to remove.

Before you sign the lease on an apartment, consider the following:

- The definition of smokefree differs for each apartment complex. Sometimes, smokefree means that smoking is prohibited in some areas, such as common areas, but allowed in others, such as personal patios or inside units. Other times smokefree means smoking is prohibited anywhere on the property.
- Smokefree does not necessarily mean your new apartment is free of toxic thirdhand smoke residue. Thirdhand smoke can be left behind by a former resident, a neighbor who smoked before the complex implemented smokefree

policies, or someone who simply ignored the smokefree policies after they were implemented.

Make sure you understand the smoking restrictions for the property you are interested in:

- Ask the property manager where smoking is allowed on the property.
- Hopefully, they will say, “Smoking or vaping is not allowed anywhere on the property. Residents must leave the property to smoke.”
- Most likely, they will say, “We allow smoking and vaping in specific areas.”

Smoke travels easily through open windows, hallways, heating and cooling systems, and around pipes and electrical wiring. If people are allowed to smoke inside their apartment units, outside on their porches or balconies, or in common areas near buildings or stairwells, the smoke will likely find its way into your apartment.

If smoking is allowed anywhere on the property, ask where people are allowed to smoke:

- Is smoking allowed inside apartment units?
- Is smoking allowed in private areas and outdoor areas, such as balconies or porches?
- Is smoking allowed in common areas, playgrounds, pool areas, or parking lots?
- Is smoking prohibited within 25 feet of the building’s doors and windows?
- Is there a designated smoking area? If so, is it more than 50 feet from any building?

In addition, you want to ask the property management the following:

- How are tenants or visitors informed about the smoking policy?
- What is the penalty for violating the smoking policy?
- Are there signs posted throughout the complex about the smoking policy, including the penalty for violating it?
- How do you handle tenants’ complaints about others smoking?

Once you are convinced that the smoking policies are enforced and that no smoking is tolerated on the premises, you still need to confirm that thirdhand smoke is not present in the unit you hope to rent. If previous residents smoked inside or outside of the unit, toxic thirdhand smoke residue can remain for years after they have moved out.

To find out if thirdhand smoke may be present in the unit, ask the property manager:

- Did the people who lived in this apartment smoke?

If the answer is “yes”, you should investigate more by asking:

- How long did they live in the apartment?
- What kind of cleaning or renovation was done to the unit after they moved out?

We recommend that you request a unit that was not previously occupied by someone who smoked. The longer a tenant who smoked lived in the unit, the more time there would have been for toxic thirdhand smoke residue to build up. It is important to find out how property management prepares and cleans apartments for new tenants.

It is unlikely that standard cleaning and applying a new coat of paint will remove thirdhand smoke, especially if the smoking was heavy and occurred for a long time. Renovation to remove thirdhand smoke may need to include the replacement of carpeting, cabinets, walls, ceilings, and ventilation systems.

We know it is challenging to find good housing. Many factors go into a final decision about where to live. Since there is no safe level of exposure to tobacco smoke, we suggest avoiding a unit where a former smoker lived. We also suggest avoiding properties that allow smoking anywhere on the property and where there are few consequences for violating smoking policies.

Do you have more questions about the toxic legacy of tobacco smoke, how it affects human health, and what we can do about it? Learn more here.

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