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A new worry for smokers' families: "Thirdhand Smoke"

By **Carmen Heredia Rodriguez**
Kaiser Health News / Kaiser Family Foundation

Michael Miller does what most smokers do to protect his sons and daughter from the fumes of his Marlboro Ultra Lights. He takes it outside.

After his 7:00am coffee, he walks out of his home in Cincinnati to smoke his first cigarette of the day. Then, as a branch manager of a road-safety construction company, he smokes dozens more on street curbs.

The tobacco never appears when Miller is coaching on the baseball or football field, or when he's in the car with his children. But when he's alone on the road, he sometimes rolls the windows down and lights up.

"I know [cigarettes are] bad," Miller said. "I know I need to quit."

Recent findings highlight the scientific community's efforts to identify potential dangers of another byproduct of cigarettes that may slip past Miller's precautions and affect his kids: "thirdhand smoke."

A study in the journal *Tobacco Control* found high levels of nicotine on the hands of children of smokers, raising concerns about thirdhand smoke, a name given to the nicotine and chemical residue left behind from cigarette and cigar smoke that can cling to skin, hair, clothes, rugs, and walls. This thin film can be picked up by touch or released back into the air when disturbed.

The researchers examined 25 children who arrived at an emergency room with breathing problems associated with secondhand smoke exposure.

They discovered the average level of nicotine on the children's hands was more than three times higher than the level of nicotine found on the hands of non-smoking adults who live with smokers. They said nicotine on the skin of a nonsmoker is a good proxy to measure exposure to thirdhand smoke.

"Because nicotine is specific to tobacco, its presence on children's hands may serve as a proxy of tobacco smoke pollution in their immediate environment," the researchers wrote.

They also found that all but one of the children had detectable levels in their saliva of cotinine, a biomarker for exposure to nicotine. All of the children in the study had parents who smoked but did not smoke themselves.

The high nicotine readings on the kids' hands, coupled with the "light smoking" habits of the majority of their parents, signalled to lead author E. Melinda Mahabee-Gittens that these toxins could have arrived from a source other than direct access to cigarette smoke.

"Clearly they're getting it from somewhere, and

Thirdhand smoke can linger in an area long after a cigarette or cigar is snuffed out — for up to five years.

perhaps it may be this thirdhand smoke connection," said Mahabee-Gittens, an emergency-room physician at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

Children face a higher risk of developing health complications from thirdhand smoke than adults. Infants tend to spend more time indoors and can be surrounded by contaminated objects like rugs and blankets, according to a 2004 study written by Georg Matt, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University who co-authored the study and has researched thirdhand smoke. An infant's propensity to place their hands in their mouth increases the likelihood of the young ingesting the toxic residue.

Thirdhand smoke can linger in an area long after a cigarette or cigar is snuffed out — for up to five years, Matt said.

"Tobacco smoke doesn't go up in the air and it disappears and it's gone," Matt said. "That's the illusion."

The negative health consequences of secondhand smoke are well established.

Researchers at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that since 1964 at least 2.5 million nonsmokers have died of diseases linked to their exposure to cigarette smoke.

In contrast, research on thirdhand smoke gained popularity only a decade ago, but multiple studies suggest the mix of toxins can lead to adverse health outcomes. An animal model simulating thirdhand-smoke-contaminated homes found the chemicals harmed mice's livers, lungs, and healing abilities. A separate 2010 study showed thirdhand smoke mixed with nitrous acid — a gas sometimes emitted from leaky gas stoves — can form cancer-causing chemical compounds. These toxins have also been shown to damage human DNA.

"All in all, I think the evidence that we've gathered is basically pointing to potentially high levels of risk to young children and toddlers, and also expectant mothers," said Anwer Mujeeb, program officer for the Tobacco-Related Disease Research Program.

Unfortunately, removing thirdhand smoke from a child's environment is no easy task. The variety of compounds that make up cigarette residue react to cleaning products differently, Matt said, making it difficult to purge a space of pollutants.

Governments and agencies across the nation have attempted to curb the threat of smoke expo-

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