

Wood Smoke: The Other Cigarette

by *Take Back the Air*



Take Back the Air is a Minneapolis grassroots organization dedicated to cleaning up the top neighborhood air polluters that invade other people's airspace without their permission, exacerbating asthma and causing a host of other health problems. Take Back the Air's goals are to encourage others to join us in spreading awareness, to encourage neighbors and businesses to switch to non-toxic products that do not affect the airspace of others. The mission of Take Back the Air is to inform the public about the hazards of wood smoke and fragranced chemicals and to provide information on healthier alternatives.

Many states are enacting legislation against secondhand tobacco smoke, but they continue to overlook recreational wood burning. Wood smoke, a big source of air pollution, is as deadly as vehicle exhaust and has many of the same toxicants as cigarette smoke.^{1,2,3} It is a major health hazard that often goes unrecognized, even by concerned environmentalists.

Recreational wood burning in outdoor fire pits, restaurants, and fireplaces across the nation has created a growing and urgent need to reduce fine particulate air pollution. Fine particulate air pollution enters deep into mammalian lungs and cannot be cleared.⁴ Wood smoke is far more concentrated than tobacco smoke and contains many of the same toxic, cancer-causing chemicals.¹ It also travels farther distances. According to the EPA, it stays chemically active in the body forty times longer than tobacco smoke.⁵

Urban outdoor air across the nation has become so infused with faint or heavy wood smoke that we don't seem to notice it much anymore. We have habituated to it. However, when we pay attention, an unmistakably rank, smoky and even sweetish wood smoke smell often fills the air. When the odor is detectable, arsenic, formaldehyde, dioxins, flourohydrocarbons, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and a host of other harmful chemicals are entering our lungs and stressing our immune system.^{1,2,3} Whether it is noticed or not, the evidence of harm is present in the contribution to soaring childhood asthma rates, birth defects, deaths from asthma attacks

and heart attacks, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).^{2,5,6}

Wood smoke is comprised of fine particulates, many of which are carcinogenic, such as benzene, toluene, formaldehyde and polyaromatic hydrocarbons.^{1,3} It invades our water and food supply with persistent organic compounds that do not break down but remain for years, causing a host of health problems. Wood smoke has been implicated in global warming, because it absorbs moisture from the atmosphere. Carbon emissions and dioxins are released into the air when wood is burned. Burning wood is one of the sootiest, unclean and least energy-efficient forms of energy.¹

The pervasiveness of wood smoke has become a major livability and air quality problem. Everyone is at risk from wood smoke exposure. Children, the elderly, and individuals with asthma, allergies, or heart disease are in the highest-risk categories according to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).^{5,6}

EPA scientists estimated that over 4,700 premature deaths occur each year in just nine US cities alone.⁷ Other studies have estimated the nation wide death toll to be tens of thousands annually.⁸

Burning Issues is an online nonprofit organization (www.burningissues.org) that provides scientific and educational information on the hazards of wood smoke. There are viable alternatives to wood burning, including gas fireplaces and handsome new electric fireplaces with flames that look real and provide heat.

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Do we have the right to force others who prefer to breathe clean air, to inhale our wood smoke? Can burning wood be justified for fun, if there is a chance that it may harm others? There is likely no justification. Just like smoke-free states have helped people quit smoking, we need laws to help prevent wood burning. If you can't breathe, what else matters?

Please contact your city officials and legislators to encourage them to address this burgeoning health hazard. The urgency of wood smoke pollution can not be overstated. The people that sell wood burning equipment and those who use it are selling and promoting pollution. Please act now to spread the word about wood smoke and protect the health of your family, your pets, and the planet!

This standard letter to your state representatives may be downloaded at: <http://mcs-america.org/woodsmoke.doc>

Contact information for your state representatives may be found at: <http://www.visi.com/juan/congress/>

It is recommended that letters be sent via postal mail. A public service announcement, which may be sent to media contacts or used in flyers may be downloaded at:

<http://www.mcs-america.org/WoodSmokePSA5BurningIssues.pdf>

Take Back the Air

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