

What happens to your pets if you smoke or vape?

By Alli Kieckbusch

Pets have become integral parts of our lives. They offer companionship, loyalty and unconditional love. Unfortunately, pet owners who smoke or vape expose their furry friends to serious health hazards.

When inhaled by people around a cigarette smoker, secondhand smoke can cause respiratory problems, heart disease or stroke. Tobacco smoke contains over 7,000 dangerous chemicals that are known to be harmful or cancer-causing.

Electronic cigarettes or e-cigarettes are not safe. The output of an e-cigarette is not vapor; it is an aerosol with thousands of chemicals. Just like hairspray or bug spray, there is no water in e-cigarettes. Manufacturers use flavors to attract youth and mask the harsh chemicals found in their products, making products appear less harmful. Secondhand aerosol from e-cigarettes, although it may smell fruity, is not safe to inhale.

Secondhand smoke puts our pets' health at risk, too. Dogs exposed to secondhand smoke have more eye infections, allergies, and respiratory issues like lung cancer, according to the Veterinary Centers of America. Because dogs' superpower is their sense of smell, those exposed to tobacco smoke are prone to nasal cancer.

Cats are at a high risk of asthma and lung cancer from tobacco smoke because their short noses allow more particles and carcinogens to be inhaled. The same goes for the aerosol from e-cigarettes. We wouldn't spray our pets with hairspray, so we shouldn't use an e-cigarette around them either.

Thirdhand smoke and aerosol are as harmful as secondhand exposure. Most of those harmful chemicals are still present even after the cigarette smoke disappears. They settle into your furniture, clothing and in cars where they can linger forever. For example, when you step into a hotel room that allows smoking and notice a distinct cigarette odor, that is thirdhand smoke.

Dogs, cats and other pets walk on all four paws. When they walk on a floor or furnishings where thirdhand smoke or aerosol is present, they get cigarette chemicals on their paws. Dogs and cats lick their paws and fur, thus absorbing toxic chemicals that can cause mouth tumors and other serious illnesses.

Guinea pigs, birds, and even fish aren't safe from second and thirdhand smoke and aerosols. Guinea pigs can develop emphysema and toxic effects on their metabolism. Birds naturally have sensitive respiratory systems. Fish can be exposed to nicotine, which dissolves quickly in water.

Animals are curious by nature and could accidentally eat a cigarette butt or chew on an e-cigarette. This puts them at risk of nicotine poisoning from high nicotine levels in their small bodies. Signs of nicotine poisoning in pets can include vomiting, unsteadiness, fast heart rate, shaking and seizures.

If your pet ingests nicotine from a cigarette, chew, e-cigarette, or any other tobacco product, get it to a veterinary clinic as soon as possible.

The best way to keep our pets safe from these dangers is quitting tobacco usage. If you need help quitting smoking or vaping, visit QuitNowMontana.com or call 1-800-QUIT-NOW (784-8669) for free counseling.

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