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Study Finds Workers Exposed to Very Unhealthy Levels of Pollution in Worksites Allowing Smoking

Employees of Gadsden bars and restaurants that allow smoking are breathing very unhealthy amounts of pollution because of exposure to secondhand smoke, according to a recent study released by the Etowah County Tobacco-Free Coalition.

The study shows that individuals working in these businesses are exposed to air pollution levels five times higher than smoke-free restaurants and bars in Gadsden. Furthermore, these employees are exposed to more than five times the safe annual level of pollution set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Secondhand smoke contains at least 250 chemicals that are known to be toxic and cause cancer.

“Numerous studies have shown that food service and bar workers in restaurants that allow smoking have a 50% greater chance of dying from lung cancer,” said Kamela Aaron, Etowah County Tobacco-Free Coalition “but no one should have to choose between their health and a paycheck.” In 2006, the Surgeon General said there was no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. Cancer, strokes, heart diseases, and respiratory diseases are several of the health hazards directly related to secondhand smoke exposure.

In February of this year, trained volunteers monitored the air quality in seven restaurants and bars in Gadsden. The volunteers spent a minimum of 30 minutes in three venues permitting indoor smoking and four venues that do not allow smoking indoors.

The amount of fine particle air pollution was measured through the use of a TSI SidePak AM510 Personal Aerosol Monitor. The results were analyzed by Dr. Mark Travers of the Department of Health Behavior and Aerosol Pollution Exposure Research Laboratory (APERL) at Roswell Park Cancer Institute. Dr. Travers has conducted the largest study of tobacco smoke pollution exposure in the hospitality industry. His research has been featured in debates over smoke-free air legislation in dozens of communities.

Dr. Travers has analyzed the results of monitoring studies in six other cities around the state including Montgomery, Dothan, Sheffield, Selma, Moulton, and Tuscaloosa. Restaurants and bars that allow smoking tested in these cities all showed unhealthy and often hazardous levels of pollution caused by secondhand smoke.

“Not surprisingly this study found extremely high levels of harmful air pollution in indoor places with smoking,” Dr. Travers said. “In fact, the only time outdoor particle concentrations in the U.S. ever reach the levels seen from smoking in this study are during a forest fire.”

The study monitored fine particle air pollution, which is released in significant amounts from burning cigarettes. Fine particle air pollution is easily inhaled deep into the lungs and can cause a variety of adverse health effects, including cardiovascular and respiratory disease and death.

The Etowah County Tobacco-Free Coalition's goal was to measure the difference in indoor air quality in smoke-free restaurants and bars and restaurants and bars that allow smoking. The group has been educating the public on the dangers of secondhand smoke and how smoke-free environments can protect the health of all citizens.

"Smoke-free workplaces are long overdue in our communities," said Ginny Campbell, chair of the Coalition for a Tobacco Free Alabama. "Studies have shown the cost of these policies to implement is very little to none, they have no negative effect on the bottom line of businesses and, most importantly, they create a safe and healthy environment for people to work and visit."

Gadsden does not have a comprehensive smoke-free ordinance, but in a 2011 poll of 382 residents, more than 93% of people surveyed thought that breathing secondhand smoke is harmful to one's health. Nearly two-thirds of residents surveyed said that smoking should not be allowed in workplaces.

The air quality monitoring study was funded by a grant from the Office on Smoking and Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.