

# leftpage

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## Do Smokers Have Rights?

I grew up in a household in which both parents smoked. I remember the usual routine of sitting at the dining room table after a meal was done. Coffee and dessert were served (my mother believed wholeheartedly that a good homemaker made dessert for her family every evening), and my parents would each light up, sending wafts of cigarette smoke billowing into the air. We kids had no choice but to suck it up—and we did, at the table, in the car, in the house.

We were kids. Our need to breathe conflicted with my parents' desire to smoke. As children, did we have any rights to breathe clean air? Breathing wasn't something on our Christmas wish list, a toy race car, or a furry kitten. Breathing is a need, a matter of life and death. Did my parents have a right to pollute the air we breathed? It was their house. They paid the bills. We were their children. What rights to the air did we have?

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), "Secondhand smoke contains at least 250 chemicals known to be toxic, including more than 50 that can cause cancer" ([http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data\\_statistics/Factsheets/SecondhandSmoke.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/Factsheets/SecondhandSmoke.htm)).

Taken from a list compiled by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the CDC lists the more serious health effects:

Secondhand smoke exposure causes heart disease and lung cancer in nonsmoking adults.

Nonsmokers who are exposed to secondhand smoke at home or work increase their heart disease risk by 25–30% and their lung cancer risk by 20–30%.

Breathing secondhand smoke has immediate harmful effects on the cardiovascular system that can increase the risk of heart attack. People who already have heart disease are at especially high risk.

Secondhand smoke exposure causes respiratory symptoms in children and slows their lung growth.

Secondhand smoke causes sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), acute respiratory infections, ear problems, and more frequent and severe asthma attacks in children.

There is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure. Even brief exposure can be dangerous.

"Live and let live" is a maxim to which I try to adhere, a maxim that identifies me as a progressive. It is a maxim that calls for a cooperative, nurturing attitude; it implies that humankind has certain inalienable rights, and that people have the right to choose how they want to live, as long as that way of life does not harm others.

"To live" is a qualitative verb, its definition long and easily modified by a slew of adverbs. But "inalienable rights," apparently, are a matter of dispute. Although the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines human rights, issues relating to humankind and the environment remain subjects of acrimonious debate. Those holding the economic purse strings call for pollution control only in the face of clear and definitive evidence showing adverse effects to the environment and human health—and even then, only if it's affordable. (As an aside, it's interesting to note that the United States has not ratified either the Kyoto Protocol or the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. What does that say about American values?)

Prominent environmental consultant Leon G. Billings wrote in 1997, for a conference on justice and the environment, "To me, environment is those fundamental resources on which all species survive—the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land we till. To the extent the acts of man make that air unbreathable, that water

unusable, that land unproductive, this core value is threatened. No man, corporate or person, has a right to threaten that value."

Smokers and cigarette manufacturers do just that. Their actions make air toxic. Smokers smoke, cigarette manufacturers produce the thing in the first place.

Reports the CDC:

More than 126 million nonsmoking Americans continue to be exposed to secondhand smoke in homes, vehicles, workplaces, and public places.

Most exposure to tobacco smoke occurs in homes and workplaces.

Almost 60% of U.S. children aged 3–11 years—or almost 22 million children—are exposed to secondhand smoke.

About 25% of children aged 3–11 years live with at least one smoker, compared to only about 7% of nonsmoking adults.

The California Environmental Protection Agency estimates that secondhand smoke exposure causes approximately 3,400 lung cancer deaths and 22,700–69,600 heart disease deaths annually among adult nonsmokers in the United States.

Each year in the United States, secondhand smoke exposure is responsible for 150,000–300,000 new cases of bronchitis and pneumonia in children under 18 months. This results in 7,500–15,000 hospitalizations annually.

Questioned Billings: "In a world in which there are those who would measure all things in economic terms, how does society protect those human assets for which a dollar value cannot be assigned?"

While the cost of poor health can be approximately tallied in doctor and hospital bills, good health—forged by clean air, clean water, nutritious food, and access to medical care—is priceless. If someone wants to smoke, I must sadly concede it is his or her right to do so, but not when it infringes upon any child or adult's right to clean air. ★