

'Smoking or non ...?' — protect yourself when eating out

As the number of smoke-free restaurants in Union County rises, county citizens are able to eat without the annoyance or harm of secondhand smoke.

Don't think that it is a problem?

Think again. Secondhand smoke is more dangerous than previously thought. In fact, secondhand smoke is responsible for up to 65,000 deaths in U.S.

non-smokers every year.

Also known as Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS), second-hand smoke contains more than 4,000 chemicals and at least 60 carcinogens. Exposure can cause heart disease, lung cancer, asthma and other respiratory illnesses and for young children is linked to ear infections, bronchitis and wheezing. When's the last time you thought about what went into your lungs at a restaurant?

Restaurant patrons are not the only ones affected by second-hand smoke. Waiters and waitresses who are routinely exposed to large amounts of secondhand smoke have increasingly more absences from work due to cough and chest congestion and can see their risk of lung cancer triple (International Journal of Cancer 2001). On the other hand, staff working in 100 percent smoke-free restaurants report many benefits such as less illness, faster table turnover resulting in increased tips and a more pleasant work environment. Designating separate smoking and non-smoking sections in a restaurant that shares the same ventilation system does not provide protection.

Smoke knows no boundaries; it easily travels to the non-smoking section.

Health effects are not the only reason restaurants are going smoke free. Restaurant and bar owners have discovered that going smoke free is really cost free. Never again will you have to buy ashtrays or replace furniture and drapery due to stains and burn marks. Being smoke free also reduces your risk of having lawsuits or disability claims from employees who become ill due to smoky environments. Wait time for tables will decrease when all seating is designated as non-smoking.

Customers will no longer complain of drifting smoke, and you will have a cleaner, classier restaurant. Many businesses that have recently made the change to being smoke-free report that profits do not decrease because many patrons prefer smoke free environments. Everyone wins with 100 percent smoke-free dining.

So, what is the actual harm of secondhand smoke? Short-term exposure causes damage far beyond the stench and irritation. Only five minutes of exposure to secondhand smoke stiffens the aorta as much as smoking an entire cigarette, and 20 minutes exposure makes non-smokers' blood platelets as "sticky" as pack-a-day smokers' platelets. These effects can take as long as 48 hours to reverse themselves. New research strongly suggests that an acute heart attack in an individual with underlying heart disease can actually be triggered by secondhand smoke exposure. This shows that there are no safe levels of secondhand smoke.

Union County is not alone in its push to increase the number of smoke-free dining options.

Many other counties in N.C. are educating the public on the benefits of smoke-free dining. Locally, a new community coalition called Smoke Free Union has formed to raise awareness about the dangers of second-hand smoke and to advocate for smoke-free environments.

Organizational partners include Union County Public Schools, NC Cooperative Extension, CMC-Union, Union County Partnership for Children, Monroe Aquatics and Fitness Center, and the Union County Health Department. Smoke Free Union was initiated through Union County Public Schools' teen tobacco prevention pro-gram funded by the NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund, and has since grown into a broad-based community coalition. As part of its smoke-free dining initiative, the coalition has provided special stoplight decals for the front door of Union County smoke-free restaurants as well as framed certificates applauding their smoke-free policies.

So, next time you decide to dine out, choose smart, and choose smoke free. Look for the bright colored stoplight decal. To view a list of smoke-free restaurants in Union County, log on to www.smokefreeunion.com and click on "Smoke-Free Dining." Thank the manager next time you are in a restaurant that is 100 percent smoke free, and if the smoke bothers you, let someone know as well. If you are interested in becoming a smoke free restaurant, contact me, chairperson for the Smoke-Free Dining committee, at the Union County Health Department, (704) 296- 4825.— Sarah Bolt is a health educator for the Union County Health Department.

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The Enquirer Journal 02/12/2006, Page A08