The dangers of secondhand smoke

The following information was obtained from the American Cancer Society, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Wellness Councils of America and the American Lung Association on environmental tobacco smoke and what is being done to protect people from the hazards of smoking. It is being shared to educate College employees on these topics.

What are the dangers of environmental tobacco smoke?
Environmental tobacco smoke, also referred to as ETS, passive smoking or secondhand smoke, occurs when nonsmokers inhale other people’s tobacco smoke.

There is strong evidence that ETS causes serious damage to human health:

- ETS causes approximately 3,400 lung cancer deaths and 46,000 deaths from heart disease each year in healthy nonsmokers who live with smokers.
- It can affect nonsmokers by causing asthma and other respiratory problems, eye irritation, headaches, nausea, and dizziness.
- Children whose parents smoke are more likely to suffer from asthma, pneumonia, bronchitis, ear infections, coughing, wheezing, and increased mucus production.
- Babies of parents who smoke have a greater chance of dying of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).
- Pregnant women exposed to ETS are at risk for having a low birth weight baby and may also be at risk for pre-term delivery and miscarriage.
- A recent study found that non-smokers exposed to ETS only at work had significantly higher levels of a nicotine metabolite in their blood than nonsmokers reporting no workplace exposure.
- ETS contains the same harmful chemicals as the smoke that smokers inhale. One of these chemicals, tar, is made up of more than 4,000 chemicals, and more than 60 of them are known to cause cancer. Some of the other chemicals in ETS include: Cyanide, Benzene, Formaldehyde, methanol (wood alcohol), Acetylene (the fuel used in welding torches), and ammonia. Cigarette smoke also contains the poisonous gases nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide. Its main active ingredient is nicotine, an addictive drug.

Cigarette smoking is the leading preventable cause of death in this country: it is responsible for one in every five American deaths and claims the lives of an estimated 1,100 people each day. More than 400,000 smokers die from smoking-related diseases each year.

What is being done to protect people from the hazards of smoking?
Both the public and private sectors have acted to help decrease smoking-related deaths and illnesses in this country.

- The U.S. Surgeon General’s health warnings have been required on all cigarette packages since 1966 and on all spit or oral tobacco products since 1987.
• Since 2001, the seven major cigar manufacturers in the United States have been providing five rotating health warnings on cigar labels similar to those on cigarette packages.
• Congress banned television and radio cigarette advertising in 1987.
• The American Legacy Foundation and many states conduct creative antismoking public service messages that are featured on television, radio, and billboards. Smoking was also banned on all domestic airplane flights.
• Taxes on cigarettes have risen in many states in recent years. They have been shown to discourage young people from starting to smoke and to encourage smokers to quit. State taxes on tobacco vary from less than $.10 a pack in some states to more than $2 a pack in others.
• Laws in all 50 states and the District of Columbia restrict or do not allow smoking in certain public places. These laws range from simple restrictions, such as designated areas in government buildings, to laws that ban smoking in all public places and workplaces. Many federal worksites, including the White House, are smoke-free.
• Initially, companies allowed smoking only in dedicated smoking rooms with separated ventilation systems or in designated outdoor areas. Studies found that separately ventilated smoking rooms might increase the lung cancer mortality of smokers, and that separate smoking areas may not adequately protect nonsmokers from ETS exposure.
• Companies that demonstrate concern for the health and well-being of their workforce have implemented a smoke-free environment to include the property or grounds of the employer. Support for employees who smoke goes hand in hand with policies that restrict smoking in the workplace. Helping employees who want to quit sends a straightforward message that the company cares about all employees, including smokers.