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## **Dorm mate's smoking is making me sick!?!** <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

I recently started a graduate program, and am sharing an apartment (within a dormitory) with other grad. students. My next-door neighbor smokes (even though it is a violation of university policy to smoke in the dorm), and the smoke usually seeps into my room through our shared bathroom. Since starting my program, I have had what seems to be a constant cold. My GP first said it was the flu (this was about 1.5 months ago), and I had just gotten over that when I got another cold. Could this be related to the secondhand smoke, and if so, what can I do to prevent getting colds? I have a suppressed immune system to begin with, which I'm sure has something to do with it, and would like to remain healthy.

Thanks,  
Constantly Sniffing

### **Answer**

Dear Constantly Sniffing,

Unlike snoring stridently, eavesdropping on private conversations, leaving wet towels on the floor, and dozens of other roommate offenses, smoking in shared spaces isn't just annoying — it's also a health hazard. Secondhand smoke <sup>[2]</sup> can cause irritation of the eyes, nose, throat, and lungs, which can lead to coughing, an achiness in the chest, and excessive phlegm production. According to research, people who are exposed to secondhand smoke are more likely to have serious health problems, including lung cancer, cardiovascular disease, low birth weight, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia, middle ear infections, and nasal and eye irritation. Children whose bodies are still developing are especially vulnerable to secondhand smoke.

As you suspect, cigarette smoke has also been shown to suppress the immune system in otherwise healthy people. You mention that you are already immuno-compromised, so secondhand smoke may pose an increased risk for you. For example, some studies have shown that smoking is more harmful to people who have HIV, who are already immuno-suppressed. Exposure to cigarette smoke can also worsen the symptoms and health problems associated with lupus, another auto-immune disease. How damaging secondhand smoke can be may

depend on individual factors, such as your age, overall health status, and duration of exposure to it.

Although much of the research on the effects of secondhand smoke on the immune system is still in the preliminary stages, it's certain that breathing in someone else's cigarette smoke is bad for *your* health. This is why so many institutions and workplaces prohibit smoking in public places. Since your university already has a rule against smoking inside dorms, your first step in getting some breathing room may be to ask your neighbor politely to honor the non-smoking policy. Or, calmly explain that his or her smoke makes its way into your home and lungs, and that this visitor is hazardous to your health. It's possible that the smoker isn't aware that their cigarette smoke is taking road trips. If these suggestions don't work, you may want to enlist your dorm's resident advisor or hall director to help in clearing the air.

Alice!

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