

Smoke gets in their eyes

People in condos and apartments are exposed to a range of health problems because of second-hand smoke

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One-third of renters and condominium dwellers in B.C. are exposed to second-hand smoke coming into their homes, according to a survey done for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of B.C. and Yukon.

The report indicates second-hand smoke is a health problem for residents of condos and apartments -- a problem some strata officials and landlords appear not to be acting on, according to condo owners and renters. To some, the only recourse is to move.

Commissioned by a unit of the foundation, the survey was conducted in February of this year by B.C. Stats, which polled more than 1,000 residents and owners of multi-unit apartments in the province.

"Exposure to second-hand smoke has been linked to an increase in lung cancer, chronic respiratory illness and heart disease," says Sharon Hammond, project manager of Smoke-Free Housing in Multi-Unit Dwellings, an initiative led by the foundation.

"Residents fear for their own and their children's health from prolonged exposure."

Awareness among residents about the dangers of second-hand smoke is increasing, says Hammond. But getting action from their strata councils, which hear such resident complaints, is not always guaranteed.

"We get seven or eight complaints a week from owners calling to complain their strata won't take action," she says.

Usually the complaints are from units adjacent to smokers, especially when smoke wafts in through open windows.

"Exposure to second-hand smoke is a reality for some stratas," acknowledges Tony Gioventu, executive director of the Condominium Home Owners' Association.

"Ventilation problems and design issues in some buildings can lead to a risk of contamination."

Most stratas already have bylaws in place banning smoking, says Gioventu. Once the bylaw is passed, existing smokers have to butt out or they can be fined up to \$200 per week for non-compliance.

Smokers face the choice of butting out or moving to a smoke-friendly building. But there could be circumstances where an individual can make a complaint to the Human Rights Tribunal and argue he or she requires accommodation because of an addiction or special need.

Residents of rental buildings are allowed to smoke in buildings where the tenancy agreement is silent on the issue. In the eyes of the Tobacco Control Act, common areas in an apartment building are considered an indoor public place, so smoking is banned.

"Landlords will respond to legitimate complaints -- as long as tenants report it," says Al Kemp, CEO of the Rental Owners and Managers Society of British Columbia. "Although three out of four renters report they are exposed to second-hand smoke, the reality is that only one in four actually complains."

Landlords can make their buildings smoke-free but cannot retroactively apply the regulations to tenants who are already smokers. With two years being an average tenant turnover, it might take several years before a rental building becomes fully smoke-free.

Although he calls the report "alarmist," Kemp says his society, which represents 1,900 members and 45,000 rental units, recommends that its members adopt a rental agreement that bans the smoking "of any combustible material" anywhere on the residential property.

Despite the potential scope of the issue, Gioventu says he does not field many complaints -- just one or two in a year.

"In British Columbia, there is a good level of co-operation between owners and strata, and not a lot of violations and conflicts," says Gioventu. "It shows individuals have a healthy level of respect toward each other."

The latest data from B.C. Stats finds one in five British Columbians smokes.

In the same report, three-quarters of respondents strongly agree that second-hand smoke is dangerous to those exposed to it.

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