

Pet owners say furry friends are major incentive to quit smoking

By [Matt Vande Bunte, The Grand Rapids Press](#)

May 01, 2010, 11:51AM



Emily Zoladz | The Grand Rapids Press Mary Ellen Ratuszny has her dog, Chief, to thank for helping her to quit smoking. "I think we've done a lot for each other," Ratuszny said. "People say, you may have saved each other." Ratuszny was a smoker when she adopted the Shepard Chow mix four years ago from the Kent County Humane Society, but she quickly learned the dog couldn't handle being around second-hand smoke. Ratuszny quit within a week. "He really has been a blessing," she said. WALKER -- Her doctor told her to quit. So did her dad. Yet, for more than 30 years, Mary Ellen Ratuszny kept smoking. Then, she fell in love with Chief, a striking shepherd chow cross with an outgoing bark. Only one problem: secondhand smoke would complicate the dog's heartworm treatment. So when Ratuszny last weekend celebrated the fourth anniversary of adopting Chief, it also marked four years since her last cigarette.

"The doctor, my father over the years, other people ragging on you to quit smoking, and here I do it for the dog," said Ratuszny, 56. "The consequences were right there in front of me. "I did not want to do anything that was going to jeopardize the health and recovery of this dog. It was a very immediate, very concrete motivator."

For many of the same reasons secondhand smoke is deemed harmful to humans, some studies suggest pets also are at risk of tobacco-related respiratory problems, allergies and even cancer. So as a [statewide ban on workplace smoking takes hold today](#), one that may push smokers to light up more often in the privacy of their own home, a growing body of research begs the question: Should the ban be extended to pet owners' homes? Perhaps the thought alone is enough to give Fido's master pause.

"Minimizing or eliminating exposure to environmental tobacco smoke would be ideal for our canine and feline populations," said Stephan Carey, assistant professor of internal medicine at Michigan State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. "(The risk) sort of parallels what we see in people. There are a couple things that are proven and there are more things with either strong or weak correlations." For example, Carey said secondhand smoke increases risk of malignant nasal tumors in dogs, especially long-nosed breeds like Dobermans and Daschunds. Smoking also is linked to feline lymphoma, he said.

In fact, secondhand smoke may pose more of a threat to pets, particularly those confined indoors, than to people, who get outside and spend time in places where there is no smoking. Pets with asthma, chronic bronchitis or other airway diseases are at greatest risk, Carey said.

"Pets tend to have smaller airways, so they tend to get affected faster," said Laura Sullivan, a veterinarian at [Cascade Hospital for Animals](#).

"When you think of cats, they groom themselves by licking. They're actually ingesting that (tobacco residue) when they're cleaning their fur. Their exposure is higher. "There's definite evidence of increased risk, the same as you're going to see with your children."

BY THE NUMBERS

Is your pet more persuasive than your doctor?

How pet owners respond to research that secondhand smoke harms pets:

- 11 percent of pet owners who smoke would think about quitting
- 28 percent of pet owners who smoke would try to quit
- 16 percent of non-smoking pet owners who live with smokers would ask the people they live with to stop smoking
- 14 percent of pet owners who smoke would ask people not to smoke indoors
- 24 percent of non-smoking pet owners who live with smokers would ask people not to smoke indoors
- 19 percent of pet owners who smoke would prohibit smoking inside the home
- 13 percent of non-smoking pet owners who live with smokers would prohibit smoking inside the home

Source: Henry Ford Health System 2009 study

Sullivan said she sees on a regular basis the effects of secondhand smoke on pets, and she has talked with some clients about the need to avoid smoking around their pets. Still, "it's probably not something that's broached very quickly because we don't often ask owners what their personal habits are," she said.

Nor is that a question asked by pet health insurers, said Loran Hickton, executive director of the Pittsburgh-based [North American Pet Health Insurance Association](#). Though "there's certainly a (health) effect on pets," insurance premiums for pets who live in homes where people smoke are the same as those for pets in smoke-free homes, he said.

About 1 million pets, less than 1 percent of the national market, have health insurance, Hickton said. A 2009 study by the Detroit-area Henry Ford Health System's Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention found that 75 percent of pet owners keep smoke-free homes.

"People are treating their pets like their family members and I don't think (secondhand smoke) is that much of an issue," Hickton said. "It's a small percentage of people that subject their pets to smoke. "Much like their children, people are stepping outside their home to smoke. People really care for their pets."

On the one hand, Ratuszny knew smoking was bad for her own health, but the retired state psychologist was in denial. So it took a surprising revelation from Chief's veterinarian to convince her to kick the habit, if not for her sake then as a secondhand benefit to him.

"To not adopt the dog at that point wasn't even a thought. So I just said 'Well, this is the universe playing a joke,'" said Ratuszny, who was a volunteer dog-walker for the Humane Society of Kent County when she met Chief, who's now eight years old. "I suppose I could (start smoking again now that Chief's heartworm is gone), but why? I like being able to breathe correctly. I just feel better. I've got more energy. "The dog and I helped each other. He really has been a blessing to me."

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