

Thirdhand Smoke in Apartments and Condos: Recommendations for Landlords and Property Managers

If you're a landlord or property manager, you may have had tenants report that tobacco smoke is drifting into their unit from neighbors who smoke. This is a serious issue, as secondhand smoke is a confirmed health hazard with no safe level of exposure. Everyone should have the right to a healthy, safe unit that's free from toxic air. Do you have questions and concerns about tenants smoking in your buildings? **Learn more about your options** at www.no-smoke.org/homes.html.

If smoking is allowed in your buildings, you're probably familiar with the stale odor of tobacco smoke that lingers in and near apartments of people who smoke indoors, even after they have moved out. Even once a person who smokes has moved out, the carpets and drapes still smell like smoke, and walls and ceilings may have a yellowish stain from nicotine and tar. The smoke odor may also increase when heaters or air conditioning is turned on.

Does this sound familiar? These are all indicators of thirdhand smoke, which is the residual contamination that smoke from cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products leave behind. This residue builds up on surfaces and furnishings and lingers in rooms long after smoking stops. It may seem merely like an offensive, stale smell, but it also indicates the presence of tobacco toxins.

Tobacco smoke is made up of gases and particulates, including carcinogens and heavy metals, like arsenic, lead, and cyanide. Sticky, toxic substances, like nicotine and tar, can cling to walls and ceilings. Gases can be absorbed into carpets, draperies, and other surfaces. A 2003 study found that [tobacco residue is present in dust and on surfaces throughout places where smoking has occurred](#).¹ A 2002 study found that [the toxic brew of thirdhand smoke can reemit \(off-gas\) back into the air](#) and recombine to form harmful compounds that remain at high levels long after smoking has stopped.² A 2010 study found that [nicotine in thirdhand smoke forms carcinogens](#), which are cancer-causing substances. Sticky nicotine remains on surfaces for days and weeks, so the carcinogens continue to be created over time, which are then inhaled, absorbed or ingested by tenants.³

Because of this thirdhand smoke contamination, apartment units or condos where smoking has taken place require **extensive turnover work and repairs at significant cost for you**. In addition to being toxic, even someone who smokes probably does not want to move into a unit that reeks of stale smoke. Overall, [most tenants prefer smokefree housing](#).⁴

What can a landlord do?

First, consider adopting a no-smoking policy for your buildings. A smokefree policy is legal and easy to implement, reduces tenant complaints, [saves you money](#),⁵ [reduces fire risk](#),⁶ and is an [amenity people are looking for](#)⁷ in housing. **Restoring a unit after a smoking tenant moves out can be expensive and time-consuming, so you might as well do it only one more time!**

Second, when converting a smoke-filled unit to a non-smoking unit, a landlord should, at a minimum:

- 1. Thoroughly wash walls and ceilings with detergent and very hot water** to remove as much nicotine and tar residue as possible. Wear gloves, and using multiple clean rags to prevent simply pushing the residue around. Wash, rinse, repeat!
- 2. Repaint walls with 2 or 3 coats of paint.** If walls are not thoroughly washed prior to repainting, nicotine stains can seep through even multiple layers of paint.
- 3. Tear up carpeting and padding, and wash floors** before replacing carpeting.
- 4. Replace curtains/blinds/window coverings** to prevent off-gassing of smoke into the environment.
- 5. Clean out ventilation ducts and replace filters.** Heating and air conditioning systems recirculate stale smoke in the unit and throughout the building.
- 6. [Learn more about restoring a smoke-damaged apartment](#)**⁸ from restoration experts.

While these steps do not and cannot remove **all** of the potential problems associated with a formerly smoke-filled apartment, it can reduce the thirdhand smoke residue and mitigate some of the off-gassing of tobacco toxins into the environment.

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