

## Heart attack rate dives after public smoking ban

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Every year Helena, Mont., counts how many people suffer heart attacks. Every year the number stayed about the same -- until the city banned smoking in workplaces, bars and restaurants in 2002.

Instantly the number of attacks among Helena's townspeople plummeted by more than 40 per cent.

Today, the British Medical Journal publishes a study that claims to be the first showing that cutting exposure to second-hand smoke prevents heart attacks immediately, and on a large scale.

The San Francisco doctors compared heart attack rates for the same months of the four years before the ban and first year after it, to avoid any seasonal differences.

And they also found a sudden contrast that developed between the city and the country around it: The area outside Helena didn't enact any smoking ban, and its heart attack numbers stayed the same through the study period, while Helena's rate fell.

There are 65,000 people in the region, all served by one hospital.

But opponents of the smoking ban are scoffing that it's too small a study to count on.

Before the smoking ban, the city averaged seven heart attacks a month. After the ban it averaged four.

Helena newspaper columnist Jacob Sullum calls the work "preposterous," and the work of "busybodies" and known activists.

Lead investigator Dr. Stanley Glantz, a cardiology professor at the University of California at San Francisco, agrees these are only initial findings, and

the issue needs more study. He won't get it just yet: The smoking ban has since been suspended while city council argues about it.

But he says the effect looks solid: Banning second-hand smoke "not only makes life more pleasant; it immediately starts saving lives," he said.

The medical journal adds the sudden difference between heart attack rates inside and outside Helena "suggests that smoke-free laws not only protect people from the long-term dangers of secondhand smoke, but that they may also be associated with a rapid decrease in heart attacks."

It's been known for years that second-hand smoke can hurt people in the long run, said Glantz.

What's new in the Helena study, he says, is that the effect comes quickly.

That should be surprising, he says, if we think about what second-hand smoke does to the

body.

Many physiological effects on the cardiovascular system occur within minutes of exposure and are nearly as large as they are for smokers, past studies have shown.

Within five minutes, the aorta becomes stiffer; within 30 minutes, blood platelets (which cause clotting) are activated, which makes the blood "stickier" and damages artery linings.

In the same time period, the ability of blood vessels to dilate and carry more blood to the heart and other organs is reduced. Within two hours of exposure to second-hand smoke, heart rhythm is disturbed, Glantz said.

The heart attack risk for smokers is known to drop by half within a year once they quit, he added. The British Medical Journal says the new study adds the first short-term data for non-smokers.

It says previous studies have shown people living or working in an environment with second-hand smoke have a 30-per-cent increased risk of heart attack.

On Sunday another medical journal published research saying that wounds in second-hand smokers are slower to heal because smoke prevents tissue-repairing cells called fibroblasts from travelling to the site of a wound. That study is in the British journal BMC Cell Biology.

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