key points

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Passive smoking in children accounts for an estimated 300,000 general practice consultations in the UK each year, the majority of which are consultations for middle ear disease. However, asthma also emerges as a cause of repeated contacts with GPs, with more than 100,000 consultations in children each year attributable to passive smoking.

It has been recognised for many years that maternal smoking during pregnancy has substantial adverse effects on the fetus. Active maternal smoking (and hence passive exposure of the fetus) causes up to about 5,000 miscarriages, 300 perinatal deaths, and 2,200 premature singleton births in the UK each year. Maternal passive smoking is likely to have similar adverse effects on fetal and reproductive health, but of smaller magnitude.

Living in a household in which one or more people smoke more than doubles the risk of sudden infant death. Smoking by the mother increases the risk of lower respiratory infections by about 60%, and smoking by any household member by more than 50%. Passive smoking increases the risk of wheezing at all ages. The effect is strongest for smoking by the mother, with increases in risk of 65% to 77% according to the age of the child. It also increases the risk of asthma, with the risk increased by household smoking by about 50%, in school-aged children, and for middle ear disease, the risk is increased by about 35%.

The simplest way to prevent passive exposure of children to tobacco smoke is to encourage and support their parents to quit smoking. Primary care health professionals, in common with all health professionals, therefore need to engage with smoking prevention and cessation initiatives at all levels, but particularly in all contacts with individual patients who smoke, or family members who smoke.

GPs are used to well timed interventions on smoking at appropriate points such as starting contraception, pregnancy, fertility treatment, and before major surgery. Other opportunities include patients becoming grandparents, beginning childminding as a career or as informal carers for children in the family.

As educators, GPs and practice nurses can explore with GP and nursing trainees the importance of smoking cessation in preventing disease and improving health, an element that is barely covered in the traditional organ-based medical school curricula.