

THIRDHAND SMOKE Resource Center

What Questions Should I Ask Before Signing My Next Apartment Lease?

Thirdhand smoke is the chemical residue from tobacco smoke. It is also called “tobacco smoke residue” or “stale tobacco smoke.” The chemicals in thirdhand smoke are toxic to humans, especially children. It can linger for years in dust and on household surfaces. It can also become embedded in carpets, furniture, clothes, and building materials. It is difficult and expensive to remove.

Before you sign the lease on an apartment, consider the following:

- The definition of “smokefree” differs for each apartment complex. Sometimes, smokefree means that smoking is restricted or prohibited in some areas (e.g., common areas) but allowed in others (e.g., patio, apartment). Other times smoking may be banned everywhere on the property.
- “Smokefree” does not necessarily mean your new apartment is free of toxic thirdhand smoke residue. Thirdhand smoke can be left behind by a former resident, or by a neighbor who ignored the smoking policies.

Make sure you understand the smoking restrictions for the property selected. Ask the property manager “Where on the property is smoking allowed?”

The preferred answer to this question is, “We do not allow smoking of any product, including marijuana and electronic cigarettes, anywhere on the property. Residents must leave the property to smoke.”

The most common response is, “We restrict smoking and use of electronic cigarettes to specific areas.”

Smoke travels easily through open windows, hallways, heating and cooling systems, and around pipes and electrical wiring. If people are allowed to smoke inside their apartment units, outside on their porches or balconies, or in common areas near buildings or stairwells, the smoke may find its way into your apartment.

- Ask where people are allowed to smoke.
- Is smoking allowed inside apartment units?
- Is smoking allowed outside apartment units, on balconies, or on porches?
- Is smoking allowed in common areas or parking lots?
- Is there a designated smoking area? If so, is it more than 50 feet from any building?





In addition, you want to ask the property management the following:

- How do tenants or visitors know about the smoking policy? Are there signs posted throughout the complex about a non-smoking policy, including the penalty for violating it?
- What is the penalty for violating the smoking policy? Do you evict tenants who violate the smoking policy?
- How do you handle tenants' complaints about others smoking?



Once you are convinced that the smoking policies are enforced and that no smoking is tolerated on the premises, you still need to confirm that thirdhand smoke is not present in apartment units. If previous apartment residents smoked inside or outside of the apartment, toxic thirdhand smoke residue can remain for years after they move out. Make sure to ask the property manager:

- Did the people who lived in this apartment smoke?

If the answer is “yes”, you should investigate more by asking:

- How long did they live in the apartment?
- What kind of cleaning or renovation was done to the unit after they moved out?



We recommend that you request a unit that was not previously occupied by someone who smoked. The longer a smoking tenant lives in the apartment unit, the more time there will be for thirdhand smoke residue to build up. It is important to find out how property management prepares and cleans apartments for new tenants.

It is unlikely that standard cleaning and applying a coat of paint will remove thirdhand smoke if the smoking was heavy and occurred for a long time. Renovation to remove thirdhand smoke may need to include removal and replacement of carpeting, furniture, walls, ceilings, and ventilation systems.



We know it is challenging to find good housing. Many factors go into a final decision about where to live. Since there is no safe level of exposure to tobacco smoke, we suggest avoiding a unit where a former smoker lived. We also suggest avoiding properties that allow smoking anywhere on the property and where there are few consequences for violating smoking policies.

Do you have more questions about the toxic legacy of tobacco smoke, how it affects human health, and what we can do about it? Learn more [here](#).



Sources:

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