

EARTH MATTERS

LIVING LIGHTLY ON THIS SMALL PLANET

Be Idle-Free

By Carol Weed

Drive-through service windows can be hazardous to your health. Air pollution is the culprit; if the car in front of you is idling, you are inhaling a concoction of toxins. The air intake in your car is near the tailpipe of the car idling in front of you, which quite normally produces carbon monoxide and nitrogen dioxide, and to a lesser extent soot, sulfur dioxide, benzene, formaldehyde and polycyclic hydrocarbons. All of these pollutants are heavier than air. In idling traffic, these toxins have been proven to be 10 times higher inside your car than outside. Exhaust from diesel-powered vehicles is worse, including bio-diesel.

The toxins in vehicle exhaust, especially nitrogen dioxide, very significantly increase asthma and other lung diseases, heart disease and diabetes. Recent studies also show they decrease alertness and cumulatively lead to an increased rate of dementia. They cause an increased rate of lung and breast cancer in adults and leukemia, ovarian, testicular and retinal cancers in children – this includes exposure in the womb. Car exhaust also produces ground-level ozone, which is very harmful to eyes and lungs, unlike atmosphere ozone, which protects us from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays.

Exhaust from an idling vehicle is not just bad for humans; it's bad for the Earth. Researchers estimate that unnecessary idling by personal vehicles in the United States produces 30,000,000 tons of CO₂ every year. That's the equivalent of 5 million extra cars on the road.

Modern cars don't need to idle. Idling more than 10 seconds uses more fuel and produces more emissions that contribute to smog and climate change than stopping and restarting your engine. Idling 2 minutes uses enough gas to go one mile. It adds to engine wear and can damage some engine components. Exhaust coming from a tailpipe is considerably cleaner than it otherwise would be due to a catalytic converter, but the converter reduces emissions much more effectively when a car is moving than when it is idling. The useful life of a catalytic converter averages 100,000 miles. Your car's air filter removes some dust and pollen, but is not protection from gaseous toxins. Hybrid cars automatically stop idling when not moving.

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Because the concentration of these pollutants is maximal close to the ground, it makes them especially hazardous to children standing at the curb waiting for a school bus or parent at the pickup line after school or a sporting event. Children's lungs are more than twice as vulnerable to air pollution as adults – with the exception of adults who have lung conditions. Asthma is the leading cause of hospitalization among children under the age of 15, is the most common chronic illness among children, and is the leading cause of most school absences. That's why idle-free zones have been instituted at many schools. Schools encourage parents and others to sign an Idle-Free Pledge.

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and other student organizations. The Mt. Diablo and Walnut Creek Unified Schools Districts are beginning such plans. Head Start Centers and Sustainable Contra Costa have been publicizing the idle-free campaign, as have public libraries. The Contra Costa Board of Supervisors very publicly signed the Idle-Free Pledge in April, with many employees signing, too. Walnut Creek is considering putting an idle-free campaign on the agenda for future discussion by the council. So far, no local planning departments have incorporated signage in their permitting processes. Terry Tallen, owner of the Rossmoor Shopping Center where several drive-through service windows are planned, was not aware of this issue, but has the project manager Dwight Belden looking into it.

Some states and cities have laws against unnecessary idling. You can be subject to a fine in New York, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Vermont, Hawaii and some cities in California, Colorado, Ohio and Utah. A few U.S. cities have even outlawed drive-through service windows.

Individually, we can save money, improve fuel efficiency and reduce engine wear while at the same time reducing air pollution by avoiding idling more than 10 seconds. We can avoid drive-through service windows in case the car in front hasn't gotten the message.

Collectively we can take additional steps. Ask a merchant with a drive-through service window to post a sign and have employees remind customers. Encourage your grandchild's school to establish idle-free zones at pickup areas if they don't exist. Spread the word: Talk to your family, friends and neighbors about the benefits of reduced idling. We'll all breathe easier when more vehicles are fossil-fuel free. For information, go to: sparetheair.org.

Save your health. Save the planet. Save money. Idle less.

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