

Carbon Monoxide

You can't see or smell carbon monoxide, but at high levels it can kill a person in minutes. Carbon monoxide (CO) is produced whenever any fuel is burned. If appliances that burn fuel are maintained and used properly, the amount of CO produced is usually not hazardous. However, if appliances are not working properly or are used incorrectly, dangerous levels of CO can result. Hundreds of people die accidentally every year from CO poisoning caused by malfunctioning or improperly used fuel-burning appliances. Even more die from CO produced by idling cars.

CO Poisoning Symptoms

At moderate levels, you or your family can get severe headaches, become dizzy, mentally confused, nauseated, or faint. You can even die if these levels persist for a long time. Low levels can cause shortness of breath, mild nausea, and mild headaches, and may have longer term effects on your health. Since many of these symptoms are similar to those of the flu, food poisoning, or other illnesses, you may not think that CO poisoning could be the cause.

If you experience symptoms that you think could be from CO poisoning: get fresh air immediately. Open doors and windows, turn off combustion appliances and leave the house. Get to an emergency room and tell the physician you suspect CO poisoning. If CO poisoning has occurred, it can often be diagnosed by a blood test done soon after exposure.

Have your fuel-burning appliances -- including oil and gas furnaces, gas water heaters, gas ranges and ovens, gas dryers, gas or kerosene space heaters, fireplaces, and wood stoves -- inspected by a trained professional at the beginning of every heating season. Make certain that the flues and chimneys are connected, in good condition, and not blocked.

Safety Tips

- Install CO alarms outside each sleeping area in your home to provide early warning of accumulating carbon monoxide
- Test CO alarms at least once a month, and replace CO alarms according to the manufacturer's instructions
- Do not run a vehicle, generator, or other fueled engine or motor indoors, even if garage doors are open
- Have fuel-burning household heating equipment (fireplaces, furnaces, water heaters, wood and coal stoves, space or portable heaters) and chimneys inspected by a professional every year before cold weather sets in
- When using a fireplace, open the flue for adequate ventilation
- Never use your oven to heat your home
- Only use barbecue grills - which can produce CO - outside. Never use them in the home or garage

- When purchasing new heating and cooking equipment, select products tested and labeled by an independent testing laboratory
- When purchasing an existing home, have a qualified technician evaluate the integrity of the heating and cooking systems, as well as the sealed spaces between the garage and house
- When camping, remember to use battery-powered heaters and flashlights in tents, trailers, and motor homes
- CO alarms are not substitutes for smoke alarms. Smoke alarms should be installed on every level of the home and in or outside all sleeping areas
- Know the difference between the sound of the smoke alarms and the sound of the CO alarms

If Your CO Monitor Sounds

- If it is a battery-powered intermittent alarm, check the battery
- If it is a steady alarm or you are unable to determine, evacuate the dwelling. Do not re-enter until the responding agency says it is OK
- Report the CO alarm warning by calling 9-1-1
- Call a qualified technician to inspect all equipment