

Prevent Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colorless, odorless, tasteless toxic gas produced by incomplete combustion in fuel-burning devices such as motor vehicles, gas-powered furnaces, and portable generators. Persons with CO poisoning often overlook the symptoms (e.g., headache, nausea, dizziness, or confusion), and undetected exposure can be fatal.

The first month of the year is the worst for carbon monoxide poisoning. In January, at least two people die each day from carbon-monoxide poisoning - three times the rate of July and August. Unintentional carbon monoxide exposure accounted for 15,000 emergency room visits annually between 1999 and 2004, with an average of 439 people dying each year.

Fatalities were highest among men and senior citizens: Men because they are engaged in more high-risk behaviors such as working with fuel-burning tools or appliances and seniors because they are likely to mistake the symptoms of CO poisoning (headaches, nausea, dizziness or confusion) for the flu or fatigue.

It should come as no surprise that CO deaths are the highest in winter (December is the second highest month). Cold weather increases the use of gas-powered furnaces as well as the use of risky alternative heating and power sources (portable generators, charcoal briquettes, propane stoves or grills) during power outages.

With these sobering facts it's a good time to remember the following safety tips to prevent CO poisoning:

- Have your heating system, water heater and any other gas, oil or coal-burning appliance inspected and serviced by a qualified technician every year.
- Install battery-operated CO detectors on every level of your home. CO detectors come in various styles/sizes such as pictured here.
- Don't use a generator, charcoal grill, camp stove or other gasoline or charcoal-burning device inside the home, basement or garage or outside the home near a window.
- Don't burn anything in an unvented stove or fireplace.
- Don't let a vehicle idle inside a garage attached to a house, even if the garage door is left open.
- Don't heat a house with a gas oven.



If a CO detector alarm sounds, leave your home immediately and call 911 from outside. Seek prompt medical attention if you suspect CO poisoning and if you or someone in your household is feeling dizzy, light-headed or nauseated.

Sources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5650a1.htm?s_cid=mm5650a1_e

Consumer Reports, <http://blogs.consumerreports.org/safety/2008/01/carbon-monoxide.html>