

Carbon Monoxide

The Consumer Products Safety Commission reports that approximately 200 people per year are killed by accidental carbon monoxide poisoning with an additional 5,000 people injured annually. ***Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless deadly gas. Since you cannot see, taste or smell it, carbon monoxide can kill you before you know it is there.***

What is it?

Carbon monoxide is a by-product of combustion, present whenever fuel is burned. Common household appliances such as gas or oil furnaces, gas refrigerators, gas clothes dryers, gas ranges, gas water heaters or space heaters, fireplaces, charcoal grills, and wood burning stoves produce it. A motor vehicle idling in a garage is a dangerous source of carbon monoxide. As you can see, carbon monoxide is a year-round hazard.

What are its risks?

The dangerous health risk carbon monoxide presents is its attraction to the hemoglobin in the bloodstream. When breathed in, carbon monoxide replaces the oxygen in the blood that tissue cells need to function. When carbon monoxide is present in the air, it rapidly accumulates in the blood causing flu-like symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, nausea, dizzy spells, confusion, and irritability. As levels increase, vomiting, loss of consciousness, and eventually brain damage or death can result.

How can I prevent carbon monoxide poisoning?

The dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning can be eliminated by carefully checking for its sources.

- ***Furnaces are frequently the source of leaks and should be inspected.*** Check furnace connections to flu pipes and venting systems to the outside of the home for signs of corrosion, rust, gaps, holes, or blockages. Birds and other animals can build nests in chimneys, preventing gases from escaping.
- ***Check heater filters for dirt.***
- ***Check burners for a flame that is mostly yellow in color.*** In natural gas-fired furnaces, this is often a sign of incomplete combustion meaning that higher levels of carbon monoxide are being released. Oil furnaces with similar problems can give off an "oily" odor. Remember that you cannot smell carbon monoxide.
- ***Inspect all other appliances that have pilot lights.*** They can sometimes be a source of carbon monoxide because the by-products of combustion are released inside the home rather than being vented to the outside.
- ***Check the clothes dryer vent opening to the outside of the house for a build-up of lint,*** which will cause a blockage of the exhaust.
- ***Barbecue grills should never be operated indoors,*** in the garage, or within 15 feet of a structure.

- If you need to warm up a vehicle, remove it from the garage immediately after starting it.
- ***Do not run a vehicle, snowblower, generator, or other fueled engine or motor indoors, even if the garage door is open.*** Carbon monoxide from a running vehicle or generator inside an attached garage can get inside the house, even with the garage door open. Normal air circulation, in an attached garage does not provide enough fresh air to reliably prevent dangerous accumulations inside the home.

While regular maintenance and inspection of gas burning equipment in the home can minimize the potential for exposure to carbon monoxide gas, the possibility for some type of sudden failure resulting in a potentially life threatening build up of gas always exists.

Installing at least one carbon monoxide detector per household, near sleeping areas will enhance your safety.