Protect Your Family and Yourself from Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Carbon Monoxide Can Be Deadly

You can’t see or smell carbon monoxide, however at high levels it can kill a person in minutes. **Carbon monoxide (CO)** is produced whenever any fuel such as gas, oil, kerosene, wood, or charcoal 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 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. Fetuses, infants, elderly people, and people with anemia or with a history of heart or respiratory disease can be especially susceptible. Protect yourself and your family from Carbon Monoxide poisoning.

How Does CO Enter The Home?

1. CO is produced by the incomplete combustion of fuel. Appliances such as water heaters, furnaces, stoves and space heaters that are fueled by natural gas, propane, kerosene or wood may emit CO.
2. If such appliances are not properly installed, maintained or used, dangerous levels of CO can result.
3. A recent report from the United States reports that up to 30% of newly remodeled energy efficient buildings have indoor air quality problems related to CO. This is because new homes are constructed to seal in as much heat as possible. While this strategy conserves energy, it limits free air exchange.

What are CO Poisoning Symptoms

CO poisoning is difficult to diagnose because its symptoms are similar to illnesses such as the flu or the start of a cold. Ensure you know the symptoms of CO poisoning.

At low levels, you or your family may experience:

1. shortness of breath
2. mild nausea
3. mild headaches

Extended exposure to mild levels can have serious long term health effects.

At moderate levels, you or your family may experience:

1. severe headaches
2. dizziness or faintness
3. vomiting
4. mental confusion
5. nausea
6. fatigue
If exposure to carbon monoxide continues, symptoms will often become worse and include severe headaches, mental confusion, vomiting, vision and hearing impairment and eventually unconsciousness.

When CO poisoning reaches this stage, CO can cause memory loss, permanent brain damage, coma and eventually death.

Play it Safe

If you experience symptoms that you think could be from CO poisoning:

1. **get fresh air immediately.** Open doors and windows, turn off combustion appliances and leave the house.
2. **go 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.

Be prepared to answer the following questions for the doctor:

1. Do your symptoms occur only in the house?
2. Do they disappear or decrease when you leave home and reappear when you return?
3. Is anyone else in your household complaining of similar symptoms?
4. Do everyone’s symptoms appear about the same time?
5. Are you using any fuel-burning appliances in the home?
6. Has anyone inspected your appliances lately?
7. Are you certain they are working properly?

Prevention is the Key to Avoiding Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

1. 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.
2. choose appliances that vent their fumes to the outside whenever possible, have them properly installed, and maintain them according to manufacturers’ instructions.
3. read and follow all of the instructions that accompany any fuel-burning device. If you cannot avoid using an unvented gas or kerosene space heater, carefully follow the cautions that come with the device. Use the proper fuel and keep doors to the rest of the house open. Crack a window to ensure there is enough air for ventilation and proper fuel-burning.
4. don’t idle the car in a garage -- even if the garage door to the outside is open. Fumes can build up very quickly in the garage and living area of your home.
5. don’t use a gas oven to heat your home, even for a short time.
6. don’t use a charcoal grill indoors -- even in a fireplace.
7. don’t sleep in any room with an unvented gas or kerosene space heater.
8. don’t use any gasoline-powered engines (mowers, weed trimmers, snow blowers, chain saws, small engines or generators) in enclosed spaces.
9. don’t ignore symptoms, particularly if more than one person is feeling them. You could lose consciousness and die if you do nothing.