

Carbon Monoxide Hazards

Protect yourself from the hazards of carbon monoxide (CO)

Carbon Monoxide (CO) is a clear, odorless gas that is poisonous to humans and pets.

Defective furnaces, fireplace flues, and oil heaters have long been the primary cause of accidental CO poisoning.

There are *no* perceptible symptoms if an individual's CO levels are less than 10 percent. Most people are unaware that they are being exposed.

Here is what to look for:

At 10 percent levels, symptoms may mimic the flu or a cold. These may include

- Headache
- Fatigue
- Mild confusion
- Irregular breathing and heartbeat
- Nausea
- Coughing

Take note especially if everyone in the home is experiencing at least some of the symptoms, and pay particular attention if pets exhibit symptoms since animals cannot get the flu.

At levels greater than 20 percent, a person can lose consciousness, go into a coma, or die.

If CO poisoning is suspected:

- Evacuate.
- Get everyone into the fresh air immediately.
- Call 9-1-1 from another location.
- Report it to the fire department, even if everyone is feeling better.

Common sources of carbon monoxide poisoning include:

- Furnaces
- Gas appliances including, stoves, clothes dryers and water heaters
- Automobiles. In many states it is required by code to prevent CO from the exhaust from entering living spaces. This is done by lowering the garage floor below the main floor of the house and placing vent holes at the bottom of the exterior garage walls.

How to Prevent Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Have your furnace and gas appliances inspected and maintained by a qualified contractor once a year. This should be done before the start of the heating months.

In addition to professional annual checkups, periodically check your furnace.

Look for these things:

Flames should be mostly blue and steady.

Look for discoloration or soot buildup around the burner access door and vents. This could signal a problem.

Check the venting system. Soft, rusted or broken vent piping can release combustion products indoors.

Examine the furnace or boiler. See that it's free of dust, rust or any other signs of corrosion.

Check air filters regularly. Clean or replace them as needed.

Make sure furnace panels and grill are in place and the fan compartment door is closed when the furnace is on. Leaving these doors open could cause CO to build up in living areas.

Install Carbon Monoxide alarms

It is a good idea to install a CO alarm on each level of your home, and in or near each sleeping area.

Try to keep the detectors at least 20 feet from any fuel burning appliances and at least 10 feet from high humidity locations like bathrooms and kitchens. If an alarm sounds, call a professional to check your gas burning appliances.

Testing your Carbon Monoxide detector/alarm

One can determine if a CO detector/alarm is working by using special CO alarm testing devices. These devices simulate CO using a small pellet in a package. When the pellet is moistened, it releases a non-toxic gas. After a few minutes, if the alarm is properly working, the alarm should sound. For more information about these testing devices, check with your local hardware store.

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