

Healthy Indoor Air Series

Carbon Monoxide

What is carbon monoxide?

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas that claims unsuspecting lives each year. Carbon monoxide poisonings are on the rise, and consumers should take steps to protect their families from falling victim to this silent killer. Carbon monoxide (CO) kills quickly and silently. More than 500 residential deaths in the United States are attributed to CO each year.

Where is carbon monoxide found?

CO doesn't discriminate. Anyone with fuel-burning appliances such as gas furnaces, ovens, ranges, and portable heaters is a potential victim. Fumes from auto exhausts and improperly vented fireplaces, the use of cooking appliances for heat, and the use of charcoal inside the home are other sources of this poison. CO poisoning can also occur after using varnish remover in a poorly ventilated setting.

How does carbon monoxide affect the human body?

Basically, CO suffocates its victims by reducing the amount of oxygen in the blood stream. If people continue to inhale CO, they face the risk of breathing difficulty, cardiac trauma, brain damage, coma, and even death.

What are the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning?

Victims of CO poisoning experience flu-like symptoms including nausea, fatigue, headaches, dizziness, confusion, and breathing difficulty. Due to increased blood pressure, a victim's skin may take on a pink or red cast. The elderly, the fetus, and those with cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases are particularly sensitive to elevated CO levels.



How will I know if I am at risk of carbon monoxide poisoning?

Look for these danger signs in your home:

- streaks of carbon or soot around the service door of gas-burning appliances
- no draft in the chimney
- excessive rusting on flue pipes or appliance jackets
- moisture collecting on the walls and windows of furnace rooms
- fallen soot from the fireplace; small amounts of water leaking from the base of the chimney, vent, or flue pipe
- damaged and discolored bricks at the top of the chimney
- yellow or discolored pilot flames in fuel-burning appliances (normal appearance is blue)

Another source of CO is car exhaust. It is important that the door between the house and garage be closed when car engines are

running. Keep the garage door open to the outside air when the car or any gas-powered equipment is running. If you have a garage attached to the house, the safest precaution would be to let autos and gas-powered equipment idle outside the garage so that carbon monoxide fumes cannot seep into your home.

What features should a CO detector have?

Since CO is a silent killer, having a CO detector is important. Most people killed by carbon monoxide poisoning die in their sleep.

When buying a detector, look for the UL mark with the adjacent phrase, "Residential Carbon Monoxide Detector."

How often should a CO detector be tested and cleaned?

If the unit is a plug-in type, test it monthly. A battery-operated detector should have the batteries changed at least once a year. All units should be cleaned regularly as recommended by the manufacturer.

How can I protect my family against CO poisoning?

- The best precaution against CO poisoning is to have a qualified service technician inspect your fuel-burning appliances once a year.
- The next step is to install UL-listed CO detectors any place outside sleeping areas and near all fuel-burning appliances.
- Check the manufacturer's booklet for instructions for installation, use, and care.

For more information

Contact your local U of I Extension office or visit these web sites:

University of Illinois Extension
<http://www.solutions.uiuc.edu>

Healthy Indoor Air for America's Homes
<http://www.healthyindoorair.org>

