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Carbon Monoxide

What is Carbon Monoxide (CO)?

Carbon monoxide is a toxic gas that you cannot see, hear, taste or even smell, making it the “Silent and Invisible Killer”. In the US alone approximately 500 people a year are killed by this poisonous gas and another 15,000 are sent to hospital emergency rooms for treatment. In many cases of reported CO poisoning the victims become so disoriented that they are unable to save themselves by either exiting the building or calling for assistance even though they are aware they are not well.

What type of effect does CO have on the body and who is at risk?

Once a victim inhales the toxic gas it then deprives the heart and brain of the oxygen necessary to function. Anyone can be a victim of CO. At lower levels the milder effects of CO are often mistaken for the flu causing symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, confusion, nausea, fatigue, increased heart rate and the blood pressure to rise, turning the victims skin a pink or red cast. Extreme exposure symptoms include convulsions, cardio respiratory failure, unconsciousness and death. These effects can vary from person to person depending on age, health and the exposure concentration and length. Medical experts believe that unborn babies, infants, children, senior citizens and people with heart or lung problems are at even greater risk for CO poisoning. Even household pets can be affected.

Where does CO come from?

CO is a byproduct of incomplete combustion. CO sources can include exhaust from motor vehicles, charcoal grills used in a home, camper, tent, garage or other unventilated areas, blocked chimney flues, fuel-burning cooking appliances used for heating purposes, wood-burning furnaces or fireplaces and malfunctioning furnaces, stoves, ovens and water heaters that operate by burning fossil fuels such as natural or liquefied petroleum (LP). When these malfunctioning appliances are not adequately ventilated, the amount of CO in the air can rise to a fatal level.

How to tell if there is a CO risk in your home?

- 1) Have a qualified service professional inspect your fuel burning appliances, furnaces, venting and chimney systems at least once a year.
- 2) Never allow an unlicensed individual to install or work on any heating, ventilation or air conditioning (HVAC) in your home.
- 3) Never keep a vehicle running in your garage. Even with the garage doors open, normal circulation will not provide enough fresh air to prevent CO build up.
- 4) If purchasing a home, have a qualified technician evaluate the integrity of the heating and cooking systems, as well as any sealed spaces between the garage and house.
- 5) Install at least one Underwriters Laboratories (UL) approved CO alarm on every floor of your home and especially outside bedrooms.

NHFIRS contact information:

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