

CO Poisoning More Likely In Winter

Published in *The Lakeville Journal*

February 18, 2010

Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

It's been called a silent killer and, according to the Journal of the American Medical Association, it is the cause of approximately 2,100 accidental deaths in the United States each year. It's carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning, the leading cause of poisoning deaths in the country. Depending on the level of exposure, it can kill in minutes or over the course of hours.

CO is produced by the combustion of any fuel: heating oil, wood, natural gas, gasoline, propane, or coal. Because it is odorless, colorless and tasteless, it may not be detected until it's too late, particularly during the night when the family is asleep. While CO poisoning poses a risk at any time of year, our constant need for warmth, with one or more heating devices in use and doors and windows closed up tight, makes the winter home heating season particularly dangerous.

"When you breathe in CO, it replaces the oxygen in your red blood cells, preventing oxygen from reaching your organs and tissues," said Kathy Shortelle, R.N., of Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association. The symptoms of CO poisoning can be subtle and can mimic other conditions, such as the flu, but with no fever. "Among them," Shortelle said, "are a dull headache, breathing difficulties, nausea, dizziness, vomiting, chest pain, fatigue, confusion, impaired judgment, even increased irritability."

If anyone in the house experiences such symptoms or you have reason to believe you've been exposed to high levels of CO, get everyone—including pets—outside into fresh air immediately. If there's time, open doors and windows on your way out, but don't foolishly delay getting outside. Then call 911 or otherwise seek emergency medical treatment right away.

"CO poisoning can result in brain damage, heart damage, which may not appear until years later, and death," Shortelle said. "While exposure to CO is dangerous for everyone, older adults, unborn babies and infants, those with heart or respiratory conditions, and smokers are especially susceptible."

Ounce Of Prevention

Naturally, preventing dangerous levels of CO from building up in your living space in the first place is by far the best way to avoid CO poisoning. Under normal conditions, the level of CO created by furnaces, gas ranges, fireplaces, portable generators, automotive engines and other fuel-burning devices isn't dangerous—as long as they are functioning properly and used correctly. Inspect your living space with an eye to possible hazards.

- Be sure your furnace, gas oven, and cooktop are functioning properly and have adequate ventilation.

- Never operate gasoline-powered engines in enclosed spaces. Don't leave a car, lawn mower or other vehicle running in a garage, particularly an attached garage, even if the door is wide open. The CO gas can actually be drawn into the house. If you're warming up your car in the morning, back immediately out of the garage and close the door.
- Have your home heating system, including flues and chimneys, inspected and cleaned every year.
- Never burn charcoal indoors, even in the fireplace.

The most immediate and effective way to protect your family is to invest in one or more CO detectors. While 93% of American homes have smoke detectors, the Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that a mere 15% have CO detectors. Like a smoke detector, a CO detector sounds an audible alarm to warn of danger. Be aware that every home needs smoke and CO detectors. Neither does the job of both. And once they're installed, test the alarms to learn to distinguish which alarm is which.

At the very minimum there should be a CO detector on each sleeping level. The one you chose will have clear instructions about placement. There are a number of very dependable models on the market at a range of prices. When properly placed and installed, they are unlikely to sound false alarms. More importantly, a CO detector will help prevent unpleasant, even tragic, consequences.