

Carbon Monoxide

What is Carbon Monoxide?

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a deadly, colorless, odorless, poisonous gas. It is produced by the incomplete burning of various fuels, including coal, wood, charcoal, oil, kerosene, propane, and natural gas.

On average, about 170 people in the United States die every year from CO produced by non-automotive consumer products. These products include malfunctioning fuel-burning appliances such as furnaces, ranges, water heaters and room heaters; engine-powered equipment such as portable generators, fireplaces, and charcoal that is burned in homes and other enclosed areas.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that several thousand people go to hospital emergency rooms every year to be treated for CO poisoning.

What are the symptoms of CO poisoning?

Because CO is odorless, colorless, and otherwise undetectable to the human senses, people may not know that they are being exposed. The initial symptoms of low to moderate CO poisoning are similar to the flu (but without the fever). They include:

- Headache
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea
- Dizziness

High level CO poisoning results in progressively more severe symptoms, including:

- Mental confusion
- Vomiting
- Loss of muscular coordination
- Loss of consciousness
- Ultimately death

Symptom severity is related to both the CO level and the duration of exposure. For slowly developing residential CO problems, occupants and/or physicians can mistake mild to moderate CO poisoning symptoms for the flu, which sometimes results in tragic deaths. For rapidly developing, high level CO exposures (i.e. associated with use of generators in residential spaces), victims can rapidly become mentally confused and can lose muscle control without having first experienced milder symptoms. High level CO exposures can be deadly if medical attention is not sought. If you suspect you or someone you know has been exposed to high levels of CO or is experiencing the symptoms above, **IMMEDIATELY SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION.**

How can I prevent CO poisoning?

- Make sure appliances are installed and operated according to the manufacturer's instructions and local building codes. Major appliances should be installed by qualified professionals.
- Have the heating system professionally inspected and serviced annually to ensure proper operation.
- Inspect chimneys and flues for blockages, corrosion, partial and complete disconnections, and loose connections.



- Never operate a portable generator or any other gasoline engine-powered tool either in or near an enclosed space such as a garage, house, or other building. Even with open doors and windows, these spaces can trap CO and allow it to quickly build to lethal levels.
- Install a CO alarm that meets the requirements of the current UL 2034 safety standard. A CO alarm can provide some added protection, but it is no substitute for proper use and upkeep of appliances that can produce CO.
- Never use gas appliances such as ranges, ovens, or clothes dryers to heat your home.
- Never leave a car running in an attached garage, even with the garage door open.

Never service fuel-burning appliances without proper knowledge, skill and tools. Always refer to the owners manual when performing minor adjustments or servicing fuel-burning equipment.

Where should I place my CO detectors?



Carbon monoxide alarms are required to be installed in all one- and two-family dwellings. Newly constructed homes require CO detectors that are directly wired to the home's electrical service. Existing homes may use battery-powered, stand-alone detectors. Wisconsin state law currently includes a similar requirement for multi-family dwellings.



- Install CO alarms on every level of the house.
- At a minimum, install a CO alarm in the hallway near every separate sleeping area of the home. Additional protection can be provided by installing a CO alarm in each bedroom or sleeping area.
- Do not install CO alarms within fifteen feet of heating or cooking appliances.
- Do not install CO alarms directly above or beside fuel-burning appliances, as appliances may emit a small amount of carbon monoxide upon start-up.
- Do not install CO alarms in or near very humid areas such as bathrooms.
- Do not allow the CO alarm to be covered up by furniture or draperies.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions for your particular CO alarm. Test alarms monthly and replace as recommended in the instruction manual.



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