

BEWARE OF THE SILENT KILLER IN YOUR HOME

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a poisonous gas that is inhaled into our bodies. It is odorless, colorless and tasteless, and deprives us of the oxygen we need to survive. If we are exposed to carbon monoxide and it is caught in time, we may suffer only minor ill effects; however, if it is not detected in time, death will result. According to the American Medical Association, carbon monoxide is the leading cause of accidental poisoning deaths in America, where 1500 people die and 10,000 seek medical attention annually. Many cases of carbon monoxide poisoning go untreated and unreported as it produces flu like symptoms, such as headache, fatigue, nausea, dizziness, mental confusion, and irritability. As the degree of poisoning increases, vomiting, loss of consciousness, brain damage and finally death results. Often, the problem occurs when the weather turns colder and the doors and windows of the home are closed which seals in the gas. A good indication of a problem is when you feel ill at home but feel better when you are out of your home. Carbon monoxide usually affects infants, children, and the elderly with heart or lung conditions, pregnant women, and pets before it affects healthy adults.

This poisonous gas is produced by the incomplete combustion of a fossil fuel that powers appliances, such as a stove, clothes dryer, water heaters, heaters, fireplace, wood burning stoves and space heaters. Fossil fuels include wood, coal, oil, natural gas, propane, methane, gasoline and charcoal. When these fuels do not burn completely, CO is produced. Never let a gasoline powered motor (car, lawn mower, snow blower) idle inside a garage that is attached to your home, or under a covered attached porch. Never use an oven for heating. Do not use a barbecue grill or hibachi inside your home, garage or other enclosed area. Even if the garage is open, the gas may still find a way into your home through cracks, doors or vents. If your home is vented properly, free from appliance malfunctions, carbon monoxide will be vented to the outside. However, as everyone tries to make their homes as energy efficient as possible, this is often not the case.

If someone begins to feel ill with the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, evacuate the building immediately and call 9-1-1 from a safe location. Do not open windows or leave doors to the outside open, as doing so will make it much more difficult to trace the source of the problem.

While we cannot guarantee that an appliance will never malfunction, we can all take steps to minimize the chance and detect a problem. Regular yearly inspections and maintenance by a qualified technician of all fuel burning units in the home can reduce the chance of carbon monoxide poisoning. This must include the chimney, vents, furnace as well as appliances. Particular attention should be made before the winter heating season. When using a fireplace, make certain that the damper is open, and do not close the damper until the fire is completely out. Make sure that all fuel burning appliances are properly ventilated. Purchase carbon monoxide detectors that sound an alarm and are approved by an independent testing laboratory. Install them as you would smoke detectors. Avoid installing detectors close to a fan, vent, window or door as this may prevent the detector from taking accurate readings. It is recommended that a detector be placed on each level of your home and especially outside the sleeping areas, place a second unit near the home's heating source. Test your CO detector once a month along with your smoke detectors, and replace the battery at least once a year. Never "borrow" the battery for some other use. A CO detector, when operating properly will sound before there are dangerous levels of this poisonous gas in your home. Maintain CO detectors by regularly using a vacuum cleaner or a damp cloth to keep them free of dirt, grease, and spider webs.

If a CO detector goes off, remain calm. Evacuate immediately and phone 9-1-1 from outside your home. If anyone is feeling the symptoms of CO poisoning, they should feel better once they are outside in the fresh air. You should advise 9-1-1 that someone is or has felt ill so that medical assistance can be sent. Plan and practice a home evacuation plan. Do not re-enter your home until you are advised that it is safe to do so. Never ignore the alarm!

It is equally important to install a smoke detector and a CO detector, as they detect two separate hazards. Remember that not all CO detectors are also smoke detectors, it may be necessary to have two detectors installed side by side. While there are combination CO and smoke detector units available on the market, not all CO detectors are smoke detectors, nor are all smoke detectors CO detectors. The combined detector can sound different patterns and activate separate lights to distinguish the type of problem. Carefully read the package to be sure of what you are purchasing. CO detectors have already saved many lives, despite the relatively short time that they have been available.

Thoroughly read the instructions that come with the CO detector until you understand how to properly install, use, test and maintain the unit.

The volunteers of the Fort Washington Fire Company bring this information to you. If you have any questions or comments about this article, please feel free to call the Fire Company on their business line at 215-646-2555 or stop into either fire station any Monday night. Their Fire Prevention Committee is available to present programs upon request.