

Beware Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Carbon monoxide (CO) is called the “invisible killer.” It is a poisonous, colorless, odorless, and tasteless gas that can cause sudden illness, permanent disability and death when inhaled.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over 400 Americans die from unintentional CO poisoning annually, while more than 20,000 visit the emergency room and more than 4,000 are hospitalized due to CO poisoning each year.

Symptoms of CO Exposure

Carbon monoxide is a hazardous gas that results from the incomplete burning of natural gas and any other material containing carbon such as gasoline, kerosene, oil, propane, diesel, coal, or wood. CO found in combustion fumes produced from sources like cars and trucks, gas ranges and generators is extremely dangerous to people (and animals) when it builds up in unventilated, enclosed or semi-enclosed spaces such as a house, garage or car.

CO is harmful when breathed because it displaces oxygen in the blood and deprives the heart, brain and other vital organs of oxygen. Carbon monoxide is especially dangerous because it cannot be seen or smelled, and it does not irritate the nose, throat or eyes. People may feel ill or become unconscious without realizing they are being poisoned.



Low levels of carbon monoxide exposure can cause subtle symptoms such as chest pain, headache, fatigue, shortness of breath, dizziness, and drowsiness. CO poisoning often goes unsuspected in this early stage because initial symptoms may be incorrectly chalked up to the flu or another illness. More concentrated exposures of CO can cause nausea, rapid pulse and breathing, and heart palpitations.

During prolonged or high exposures, symptoms may worsen or develop rapidly. Severe symptoms include vomiting, confusion and loss of coordination, in addition to muscle weakness and loss of consciousness. Symptoms of CO poisoning vary widely from person to person, and certain groups—infants and young children, elderly people, heavy smokers, and those with chronic heart disease or respiratory problems—are more susceptible to its effects.

Reducing the Risk of CO Poisoning

Incidents of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning happen more often in the winter months when people increase their use of heaters and leave cars idling to warm up. In addition, when winter storms cause power outages, people seek alternate—and sometimes unsafe—energy sources for heating and cooking.

The risk of carbon monoxide poisoning can be reduced by following some fundamental measures:

- Have heating systems, water heaters and other fuel-burning appliances serviced by a qualified technician every year.
- Never use a gas range, oven or clothes dryer for heating.
- Never use a fuel-powered heater, generator or tool in enclosed or partially-enclosed spaces. Engine-powered equipment can produce high levels of CO very quickly.
- Properly ventilate fuel-burning appliances and fireplaces. Keep chimneys, stove pipes, and outside vents free from becoming clogged or blocked by snow or other debris.
- Do not leave a vehicle—or gas-powered snow- or leaf-blower—running in a garage even with the garage door open.
- Never burn charcoal indoors.
- Keep snow from blocking your vehicle's tailpipe if you are stuck in traffic or parked with the engine running.
- Be alert to ventilation problems in the workplace — especially in enclosed areas where gases of burning fuels may be released like warehouses, refineries or docks—and promptly report complaints of dizziness, drowsiness or nausea.

Detecting CO

The best protection against CO poisoning is a carbon monoxide detector that displays the CO level and sounds before life-threatening levels of CO are reached. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) recommends that every home have a UL approved battery-operated CO alarm or plug-in CO alarm with battery back-up installed near sleeping areas.

For additional information on reducing the risk CO poisoning when you are at home, in your car or at work, visit:

www.cdc.gov/co

www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PUBS/466.html

http://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data_General_Facts/carbonmonoxide-factsheet.pdf

If the Alarm Sounds

Never ignore a CO alarm. It is warning of a potentially deadly hazard. If the alarm signal sounds—or you otherwise suspect CO poisoning:

- Immediately move outside to fresh air
- Call 911 or other local emergency service or fire department for medical attention or assistance
- Administer oxygen or perform rescue breathing ONLY IF you are trained and certified to do so
- Tell responders you suspect CO poisoning
- NEVER enter or re-enter a contaminated space. You may be exposed to fatal levels of CO poisoning. Only professionally-trained, skilled responders using appropriate equipment should perform rescue and recovery operations.

This guide is for informational purposes only and does not contain Securitas USA's complete policy and procedures. For more information, contact your Securitas USA supervisor or account manager.

