

Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide (CO) is an invisible odorless gas that can kill you directly or indirectly. It arises as a result of improper or incomplete burning of fuel. In high concentrations, CO can kill by itself when it enters the bloodstream and chokes off the oxygen to the heart and brain. However, even a small amount that wouldn't ordinarily be fatal can make you so drowsy that you fall asleep. Then another accident you would normally avoid if awake, perhaps while driving a car, could occur.

Sources of Carbon Monoxide

A typical source of dangerous levels of carbon monoxide is a car running in an enclosed garage, perhaps to "warm up" the engine on a cold morning. In fact, just about every type of fuel produces CO when it burns or when it's not properly mixed with oxygen: gasoline, natural gas, charcoal, wood, propane, kerosene and diesel fuel. Vehicles in need of a tune-up produce more CO than others, but even a new factory-tuned vehicle can produce dangerous levels of CO if used in an enclosed area.

The most common source of dangerous CO levels in homes is an improperly maintained furnace. People overinsulate their homes to the point that the oxygen supply to the furnace is choked off. Fuel can't burn efficiently, so CO is produced. A dirty gas range that burns orange instead of blue is releasing CO into the air. Moisture on windows and walls is a common sign of excessive CO indoors. Likewise, burning charcoal inside a home, a camper, a garage, a tent or any enclosed area produces dangerous levels of CO. You can install a detector to determine the amount of CO in your home.

Symptoms of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

You can detect carbon monoxide only by the symptoms it causes. Suspect CO if you get dizzy or

drowsy, develop a headache or feel nauseous with no other explanation. Your vision may also get blurry and your reflexes may slow down. Some people also report a feeling of tightness across their foreheads. In fact, CO poisoning is often confused with the flu because the early symptoms are nearly identical. People may go to bed with these symptoms, thinking they'll feel better in the morning, and they may never wake up. About the only distinguishing symptom of the flu is a fever. If you have these symptoms with no fever, suspect CO poisoning. A simple test you can do is to see if you feel better after leaving the house and being outdoors for a few minutes. If you do feel better, suspect a dangerous CO concentration in the house.

Treating a Victim of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Get possible victims of CO poisoning into the open air or a well-ventilated area as soon as possible. Conscious victims may be uncooperative, confused or dazed. If you come upon someone slumped over a car steering wheel with the engine running, and the car is inside an enclosed garage, open the garage door immediately and take a few deep breaths. Then, holding your breath, wrap your arms under the victim's arms and link them across the victim's chest to drag the victim into the open air. If the victim is not breathing, administer rescue breathing. Once the victim starts breathing, turn the person over onto his or her stomach, keeping the head turned to allow a free flow of air. In the meantime, have someone dial 911 or your local emergency medical service.



An Invisible Killer