

Carbon monoxide is a poisonous gas that is odorless and tasteless. It is caused by the incomplete combustion of any fuel, including gasoline, oil, propane, natural gas, wood or coal.

What are the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning?

Symptoms are often confused with those of the flu, and most cases of CO poisoning occur at the onset of the heating season - or during the flue season. A victim may not experience ANY of the following symptoms, or only one or a few of these symptoms:

- * Headache
- * Irritability
- * Dizziness
- * Weakness
- * Visual disturbance
- * Nausea
- * Vomiting
- * Fainting upon exertion
- * Loss of muscle control
- * Sleepiness
- * Fluttering of the heart
- * Confusion
- * Cherry red skin (in severe cases)
- * Tightening of the chest

How can carbon monoxide be produced in a home?

High levels of carbon monoxide can be produced by:

- * A malfunctioning heating system that operates on propane, natural gas, oil, coal or wood.
- * A blocked chimney or heating / water heating vent pipe.
- * Heating equipment that is not adequately ventilated. This can be a problem if you enclose your heating system to add living space.
- * A tightly sealed, over insulated home that lacks proper ventilation.
- * An exhaust fan in an attic or loft that continues to run when doors and windows are closed.

Potentially dangerous combustion gases can be drawn into the home instead of escaping through the chimney.

- * A barbecue grill used indoors.
- * A natural gas or propane range that is used to heat the home.
- * Running a car in an attached garage.
- * Repairing an engine (for a lawn mower, snow blower, vehicle, etc. indoors without proper ventilation.

Keep in mind, though, that the level of carbon monoxide in the home is directly related to the level of CO outside the home. This means that if you live on a street with a lot of traffic, you are likely to have a higher level of CO in your home than someone living in a low-traffic area.

What warning signs in the home can alert you to the presence of high levels of carbon monoxide?

- * Stuffy, stale or smelly air.
- * Very high humidity.
- * Fallen soot from a fireplace or heating system.
- * No draft in your chimney or a hot draft backing out of the heating system and into the basement or house.
- * Flue like symptoms that disappear when you spend time outside your home.

What measures can I take to lessen the chance of carbon monoxide poisoning?

- * Install carbon monoxide detectors.
- * Check your heating system and chimney every autumn for blockage.
- * Have your heating system "tuned-up" (preferably before the heating season begins) to ensure it's in good working order.
- * Periodically check your heating system for hot drafts backing out of the burner.
- * Have your appliances checked periodically to make sure they're working properly.
- * If you have insulated your home, had major renovations done, or enclosed your heating system to increase living space, make sure there is adequate ventilation.
- * Use appliances properly - don't use barbecue grills indoors, don't use your stove / oven for heat, and don't run a vehicle in a closed garage.
- * Don't repair lawn mowers, snow blowers or vehicles indoors without proper ventilation.
- * Have your vehicle's muffler and tailpipes inspected regularly for CO leaks.

What should you do if you suspect the presence of high levels of CO in your home?

- * Open the windows and doors.
- * Call your heating fuel supplier or a licensed heating contractor for an emergency inspection.
- * If carbon monoxide is detected, seek medical attention immediately.

What's the cure for CO poisoning?

- * Exposure to fresh air - or pure oxygen - is the cure.