Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Carbon monoxide is called the “silent killer” because you cannot see it, taste it or smell it. Carbon monoxide is the leading cause of accidental poisoning deaths in North America. Every household that is equipped with a furnace, boiler, water heater, fireplace or emergency generator that burns natural gas, fuel oil, coal or wood should have a carbon monoxide detector installed. Smoke detectors, which are required in some types of buildings and dwellings, do not monitor carbon monoxide levels.

What is carbon monoxide?

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless and tasteless gas produced by the incomplete burning of carboniferous fuels such as wood, coal, natural gas, and fuel oil.

What are the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning?

It may be difficult to know when you are suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning because symptoms can be very similar to the flu. Exposure to carbon monoxide can cause headache, nausea, redness of the skin, dizziness, confusion, and even loss of consciousness. The majority of people who are killed are overcome in their sleep.

What should I do if I think I am exposed to carbon monoxide?

If you suspect someone is suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning, get them to fresh air immediately and then call the poison center toll-free at **1-800-222-1222**. If the person is unconscious, call 911 for immediate medical assistance.

Do I need to worry about carbon monoxide in the warmer months?

Yes, carbon monoxide is produced from burning fossil fuels in home heating as well as water heaters, stoves, barbeque grills, gas-powered generators, and automobiles. While carbon monoxide poisoning increases in the winter months, people are at risk anytime they are exposed to this equipment. After natural disasters, like hurricanes, with extended power outages, improper use of generators causes fatal exposures from carbon monoxide.

How do I prevent carbon monoxide poisoning in my home?

- **Install a carbon monoxide detector** to monitor the air and issue an alarm if the level of carbon monoxide reaches a dangerous zone. These are available at local hardware and big box stores. Only one alarm is needed per floor of your home and install it close to the sleeping areas. CO alarms that plug into the wall with a battery back-up system are recommended.
- **Have your heating system inspected** by a qualified professional yearly before it is turned on in the fall.
- **Check the fireplace chimney or flue** for leaves, branches bird nests or other blockage that may have accumulated.
- **Check all alternative heating sources** such as space heaters or wood stoves to ensure they are in safe operating condition and are being properly used.
- **NEVER use the gas range or oven for heating,** even in power failures.
- **NEVER burn coal or use charcoal in a closed space,** even a garage with the door open.
- **Always run gas-powered generators in open spaces,** and make sure they are well away from air conditioning units or other air intake vents.
- **NEVER leave an automobile motor running in a closed garage.** Pay extra attention when driving the newer quiet hybrid vehicles.

The Texas Poison Center Network serves the State of Texas to prevent poisoning. TPCN offers free and confidential services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you believe you have been exposed to a poison or have questions about a substance that may be poisonous, call **1-800-222-1222** immediately.