Howard County
Health Department

Preventing Carbon Monoxide Poisoning After an Emergency

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colorless, odorless gas that can cause sudden illness and death if inhaled.

When power outages occur during emergencies, such as hurricanes or winter storms, the use of alternative sources of fuel or electricity for heating, cooling or cooking can cause CO to build up in a home, garage or camper and poison the people and animals inside.

Every year, more than 400 people die in the U.S. from accidental CO poisoning. CO is found in combustion fumes, such as those produced by small gasoline engines, stoves, generators, lanterns and gas ranges or by burning charcoal and wood. CO from these sources can build up in enclosed or partially enclosed spaces. People and animals in these spaces can be poisoned and can die from breathing CO.

How to Recognize CO Poisoning

Exposure to CO can cause loss of consciousness and death. The most common symptoms of CO poisoning are headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain and confusion. People who are sleeping or who have been drinking alcohol can die from CO poisoning before ever having symptoms.

Important CO Poisoning Prevention Tips

- Never use a gas range or oven to heat a home.
- Never leave the motor running in a vehicle parked in an enclosed or partially enclosed space, such as a garage.
- Never run a motor vehicle, generator, pressure washer or any gasoline-powered engine outside an open window, door or vent where exhaust can vent into an enclosed area.
- Never run a generator, pressure washer or any gasoline-powered engine inside a basement, garage or other enclosed structure, even if the doors or windows are open, unless the equipment is professionally installed and vented. Keep vents and flues free of debris, especially if winds are high. Flying debris can block ventilation lines.
- Never use a charcoal grill, hibachi, lantern or portable camping stove inside a home, tent or camper.
- If conditions are too hot or too cold, seek shelter with friends or at a community shelter.
- If CO poisoning is suspected, consult a health care professional right away.

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), www.emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/cofacts.asp. For more information, visit www.emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/carbonmonoxide.asp.

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