

Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center's Drug and Poison Information Center Health Alert

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Risk: Check Your Chimney Flue

The Cincinnati Drug and Poison Information Center is warning about a potential increase in carbon monoxide (CO) poisonings as a result of accidental exposures during the beginning of heating season. When furnaces are first turned on the chimneys must be checked to make sure they are free of obstructions such as critters' nests, fallen bricks, leaves and small branches and other debris. Clear chimney flue clean outs and have an annual servicing of your furnace and water heater by a qualified contractor.

Potential sources of CO exposure include furnaces, water heaters, gasoline powered equipment like generators, snow blowers, and water pumps, using gas ranges to heat an entire house, other inappropriate home heating choices like kerosene heaters, and inappropriate cooking choices like using charcoal grills and camping stoves inside the house.

Kerosene/butane/propane space heaters can also be a significant source of CO. These appliances are sold for household use and when carefully maintained may only produce small amounts of CO. CO production from these appliances varies greatly depending on the general maintenance of the device and the fuel used. When these heaters are used in an emergent or temporary setting, without proper maintenance, they can be dangerous.

Carbon monoxide is invisible, odorless, tasteless and non-irritating. Without a CO detector, it may be impossible to tell whether CO is present or not. Every home should have one or more working carbon monoxide detectors. The best CO detectors for home use are those with battery backup for times when normal electric power is interrupted, and digital peak concentration readout. They are readily available and can be purchased at hardware stores for around 20-40 dollars.

Signs and Symptoms of CO poisoning include vomiting dizziness and headache and confusion. Other more serious symptoms like loss of consciousness are common. Mild symptoms may be mistaken for the flu or other illnesses. Loss of life or permanent disability may also occur. If you suspect that you or other persons are being exposed to CO, get away from the source of the exposure and contact the poison center immediately. You can reach the poison center by phone at 1-800-222-1222 or 513-636-5111.