Carbon Monoxide: FAQs

Q: What is carbon monoxide (CO)?

A: CO is an odorless, colorless gas that can cause flu-like symptoms, sudden illness, and death.

Q: Where is CO found?

A: CO is found in combustion fumes, such as those produced by cars and trucks, small gasoline engines, stoves, lanterns, burning charcoal and wood, gas ranges and heating systems. CO from these sources can build up in enclosed or semi-enclosed spaces. People and animals in these spaces can be poisoned by breathing it in.

Q: What are the symptoms of CO poisoning?

A: The most common symptoms of CO poisoning are headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion. High levels of CO inhalation can cause loss of consciousness and death. Unless suspected, CO poisoning can be difficult to diagnose because the symptoms mimic other illnesses. People who are sleeping or intoxicated can die from CO poisoning before ever experiencing symptoms.

Q: How does CO poisoning work?

A: Red blood cells pick up CO quicker than they pick up oxygen. If there is a lot of CO in the air, the body may replace oxygen in blood with CO. This blocks oxygen from getting into the body, which can damage tissues and result in death.

Q: Who is at risk from CO poisoning?

A: All people and animals are at risk for CO poisoning. Certain groups—unborn babies, infants, and people with chronic heart disease, anemia, or respiratory problems—are more susceptible to its effects. Each year, more than 400 Americans die from unintentional CO poisoning, more than 20,000 visit the emergency room, and more than 4,000 are hospitalized due to CO poisoning. Fatality is highest among Americans 65 and older.

Q: How can I prevent CO poisoning from my home appliances?

A:
- Have your heating system, water heater, and any other gas, oil, or coal burning appliances serviced by a qualified technician every year
- Do not use portable flameless chemical heaters (catalytic) indoors. Although these heaters don't have a flame, they burn gas and can cause CO to build up inside your home
- If you smell an odor from your gas refrigerator's cooling unit, have an expert service it. An odor from the cooling unit of your gas refrigerator can mean there is a defect and it could be giving off CO
- When purchasing gas equipment, buy only equipment carrying the seal of a national testing agency, such as the American Gas Association or Underwriters' Laboratories
- Install a battery-operated CO detector in your home, and check or replace the battery when you change the time on your clocks each spring and fall

Carbon monoxide detectors should be replaced approximately every five years. If you have any doubts about your carbon monoxide detector's age or reliability, replace it!

Carbon Monoxide: FAQs *(cont'd)*

Q: How do I vent my gas appliances properly?

A:
- All gas appliances must be vented so that CO will not build up in your home
- Horizontal vent pipes to fuel appliances should not be perfectly level. Indoor vent pipes should go up slightly as they go toward outdoors to help prevent CO or other gases from leaking if the joints or pipes aren't fitted tightly
- Never burn anything in a stove or fireplace that isn't vented
- Have your chimney checked for blockages or cleaned every year. Debris can cause CO to build up inside your home
- Never patch a vent pipe with tape, gum, or something else. This kind of patch can make CO build up in your home

Q: Is it safe to cook with my gas appliances or use them to heat my home when the power is out?

A: NO. The following methods are unsafe and can cause a build up of CO inside your home:
- Never use a gas range or oven to heat your home
- Never use a charcoal grill or a barbecue grill indoors unless it is inside a vented fireplace
- Never burn charcoal—red, gray, black, or white—indoors
- Never use a portable gas camp stove indoors
- Never use a generator inside your home, basement, or garage, or outside near a window, door, or vent

Q: How can I avoid CO poisoning from my vehicle?

A:
- Have a mechanic check the exhaust system of your car every year. A small leak in your car's exhaust system can lead to a build-up of CO inside the car
- Never run a car or truck in the garage with the garage door shut. To avoid CO build up, always open the garage door before turning on your car or truck
- If your vehicle has a tailgate, be sure to also open the vents or windows when the tailgate is open. If only the tailgate is open, CO from the exhaust will be pulled into your car

Q: How often should I test my CO detectors?

A: CO detectors should be tested monthly, however the test buttons on these detectors only test the battery and circuitry, not the sensors. The sensor in the detector is considered to be the most likely component to fail and has a limited lifetime of about five years. The only way to test the sensor is with an external source of calibrated test gas.

Q: How long will my new CO detector last?

A: Your new CO detector will last about five years, unless defective. If your CO detector is over five years old, we strongly encourage you to replace it. Combination CO and smoke detectors often have a "manufacture date" or a "replace by" date inside the cover on the main board. These dates will give you a good indication of when your detector should be replaced. If you have any doubts about your CO detector's age or reliability, replace it! Your family's safety counts on it.

CO detectors should be tested monthly and replaced immediately if the detector malfunctions.

Lebanon Township Volunteer Fire Department