



Ask The **Experts** 

on Heating & Cooling

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The arrival of cold weather increases the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning, which can occur when gas furnaces, fireplaces and other heating devices don't work properly and release the dangerous gas into homes.

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colorless, odorless, tasteless, poisonous gas produced by incomplete burning of carbon-based fuels, including gas, oil, wood and coal. Carbon-based fuels are safe to use. It is only when the fuel does not burn properly that excess CO is produced, which is poisonous. When CO enters the body, it prevents the blood from bringing oxygen to cells, tissues, and organs.

You can't see it, taste it or smell it but CO can kill quickly without warning. According to the HSE (Health and Safety Executive) statistics, every year around 15 people die from CO poisoning caused by gas appliances and flues that have not been properly installed, maintained or that are poorly ventilated. Levels that do not kill can cause serious harm to health if breathed in over a long period. In extreme cases paralysis and brain damage can be caused as a result of prolonged exposure to CO. Increasing public understanding of the risks of CO poisoning and taking sensible precautions could dramatically reduce this risk.

Early symptoms of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning can mimic many common ailments and may easily be confused with food poisoning, viral infections, flu or simple tiredness.

Symptoms to look out for include:

- headaches or dizziness
- breathlessness
- nausea
- loss of consciousness
- tiredness
- pains in the chest or stomach
- erratic behavior
- visual problems

There are signs that you can look out for which indicate incomplete combustion is occurring and may result in the production of CO:

- Yellow or orange rather than blue flames (except fuel effect fires or flue less appliances which display this color flame)
- Soot or yellow/brown staining around or on appliances
- Pilot lights that frequently blow out
- Increased condensation inside windows

What are the danger signs of carbon monoxide? Be alert to these signs:

- Stale, stuffy air in your home.
- The pilot light of your furnace or other gas-fired equipment keeps going out.
- A sharp smell of rotten eggs when furnaces and appliances turn on.
- A normally clear blue burner flame becomes "lazy" and mostly yellow or pilot light turns mostly yellow. Note that a little yellow will always be present. Small bits of airborne dust will go through the flame causing some yellow.
- Chalky, white powder on a chimney or exhaust vent pipe or soot build-up around the exhaust vent.
- Excessive moisture on walls or windows in areas with natural gas equipment.
- Be sure to check your humidifier settings as well. If the humidifier is turned up too much, this can also cause moisture build up on windows and walls.
- Your carbon monoxide alarm sounds

Carbon monoxide hazards can result from:

- Natural gas heating systems and appliances that are not properly maintained.
- Gas-fired equipment in an enclosed space, which has an inadequate fresh air supply for venting of exhausts.
- Dirt and blockage such as a blocked chimney or flue.
- Careless use of equipment, for example, running gasoline-powered equipment in an attached garage.
- Using equipment which consumes household air. A roaring fire can use up to ten times as much air as your furnace. If possible, open a window near the wood fireplace, helping replace the air that is going up the chimney.
- Tobacco smoking also contributes small amounts of CO into the air.

Do natural gas appliances produce carbon monoxide?

Natural gas appliances that are properly installed and maintained should not release carbon monoxide. To

operate safely, any fuel-burning appliances must have an adequate supply of fresh air and proper venting that carries exhaust outdoors. You probably have a smoke alarm in your home. After all, new homes come with them already installed and many communities have laws that require them to be installed. What about a carbon monoxide detector? Do you have any installed in your home? Do you need one? The importance of having a carbon monoxide detector is often underestimated or simply forgotten by many homeowners. Unfortunately, carbon monoxide sources, such as furnaces, generators, and gas heaters, are common in homes and can put your family at risk for carbon monoxide poisoning.

The common sources of carbon monoxide exposure include:

- Oil and gas furnaces
- Motor vehicles
- Stove/Gas range
- Gas line leaks
- Gas water heaters
- Generators
- Space heaters

So you should definitely have a carbon monoxide detector in your home if you have any appliances that are not electric and that burn natural or liquefied petroleum gas, oil, wood, coal, or other fuels, or if you have a home with an attached garage.

Preventing Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

- Have your heating system, water heater, and any other gas burning appliance serviced by a qualified technician every year.
- 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.
- If your CO detector sounds, evacuate your home immediately and telephone 911.
- Seek prompt medical attention if you suspect CO poisoning and are feeling dizzy, light-headed, or nauseated.
- Do not use a generator, charcoal grill, camp stove, or other gasoline or charcoal burning device inside your home, basement, or garage or near a window.
- Do not run a car or truck inside a garage attached to your house, even if you leave the door open.
- Do not burn anything in a stove or fireplace that is not vented.
- Do not heat your house with a gas oven.

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