

Carbon Monoxide What Everyone Should Know

Carbon monoxide is often misunderstood. Because it is a component of smoke found from a burning fuel, people often equate it with fire and smoke emergencies. It can be deadly and should be respected but it is important to understand it and how it affects humans.



Myth #1: You can smell carbon monoxide and sometimes it has a taste.

Fact: Carbon monoxide is odorless, colorless and tasteless. Sometimes when people say they can smell it what they are really smelling is the byproducts of the fuel that is burning, not the CO. These fuels can also cause a taste in some people's mouths.

Myth #2: The only time carbon monoxide exists is if something is burning a fuel such as a fireplace, gas appliance or heating device.

Fact: Carbon monoxide is in the air we breathe daily. Our bodies need a certain amount of it to function and are very good at processing what is not need out. Acceptable levels can even be higher than normal when our houses are closed up tight because of weather and we are running fuel-burning appliances properly. The human body can function normally even with slightly higher concentrations or through short "spikes". Our bodies are made to handle that.

Myth #3: Carbon monoxide alarms should be installed and maintained like smoke alarms.

Fact: While smoke rises, carbon monoxide is about the same weight as the air we breathe so it is all around us. That is why many CO alarms are made to plug into outlets at floor level because it really doesn't matter at what height in the room they are installed. Like smoke alarms, CO alarms should be tested and vacuumed at least monthly, batteries should be changed twice a year when you change your clocks and they should be replaced when they become 8-10 years old.

Myth #4: Carbon monoxide alarms are notorious for giving false alarms.

Fact: When they were first on the market, they were engineered to be so sensitive that they were alarming when no real danger existed. Fire departments made numerous calls to homes where no emergency had ever existed. In 1996 the standard was adjusted and this problem went away. Most of the original alarms have been replaced with newer ones but if you still have one you should consider replacing it because it is close to 10 years old. We still receive calls that show no abnormal reading when we arrive. These are not false calls though. Usually something actually caused a spike and by the time the fire department arrives the problem has gone away because the occupants have opened doors and windows.

Myth #5: Carbon monoxide emergencies and fire emergencies are the same and should be handled in the same way.

Fact: A fire is something that happens quickly. Fires double in size every 30 seconds. Carbon monoxide while it can rise quickly (such as lighting a fire place with a closed damper), usually it is something that happens over time (such as a small leak in a flue). Because of that smoke alarms are set to sound as soon as any smoke reaches them. Carbon monoxide alarms are programmed to sound if the levels of CO become dangerous over a set period of time. As we've said before, our bodies can take short spikes. That is why smoke alarms have one alarm that sounds when smoke is present. Many CO alarms have an "alert" alarm and a "warning" alarm. Alert usually means there may be a problem, investigate and let some fresh air in the house. Warning usually means there is a problem, get everyone out and call for help. It is important for you to read the instructions that come with your alarms and know the difference.

Myth #6: I'll be able to tell if my house has an excessive level of carbon monoxide.

Fact: You may not be able to. Symptoms of CO poisoning are very similar to flu symptoms. That's why having working CO alarms on each level of your home is very important. It could alert you to a problem that you might otherwise assume is part of the flu season.



Carbon Monoxide Checklist

- Install a UL listed carbon monoxide alarm on every level of your home.
- Test and vacuum all alarms at least monthly, keep fresh batteries in them and replace them after 10 years.
- Have chimneys and flues inspected annually for cracks, leaks and the need for cleaning. Make repairs before using the appliance.
- Vent clothes dryers to the outside.
- Do not use charcoal or gas grills indoors (including the garage) or close to open windows or doors.
- Have gas powered furnace and water heater inspected annually to be sure they are burning cleanly and in good working order.
- Do not operate combustion engines (automobile, lawn mower, generator, tractors, snow blowers, etc.) in enclosed areas (including the garage) or close to open windows or doors.
- Operate space heaters according to the manufacturer's instructions and be sure to ventilate as recommended.
- Never use a range or oven as a room-heating device.