

Beware of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Portable, electric generators are used by many families and businesses to combat power outages, and have become an increasing cause of death, according to the National Fire Protection Association. Carbon monoxide poisoning from the use of fuel-burning appliances kills more than 200 people each year and sends about 10,000 to hospital emergency rooms for treatment. Others die from carbon monoxide produced while burning charcoal inside a home, garage, vehicle or tent, or from carbon monoxide produced by cars unintentionally left running in attached garages or gas-powered generators when the exhaust accumulates in living spaces.

The risk of carbon monoxide poisoning is particularly high during the cold weather season, and you should stay alert to the risk of poisoning when spending more time in vehicles, or using unfamiliar fuel-burning heaters, generators or appliances in and around your home. Opening doors and windows or operating fans will not guarantee your safety. By knowing and practicing the following guidelines, you will be able to decrease you and your neighbors' risk of poisoning.

General precautions to follow:

- Have your traditional heating system inspected annually.
- Never warm up a motor vehicle in a garage, even if the door is open. Also, have your vehicle checked for exhaust leaks.
- Be sure all fuel burning sources such as gas, wood stoves, fireplaces, and portable heaters are working properly and their flues or chimneys have been inspected.
- Never burn charcoal inside.
- Never use a gas range or oven for home heating.
- If the structure you are in is air tight and lacks ventilation, crack a window for fresh air.
- Battery-operated Carbon Monoxide (CO) alarms or plug-in CO alarms with battery back-up should be installed in the home.
- If the CO alarm sounds and someone in the home is experiencing symptoms, immediately evacuate and call 911.
- If the alarm goes off and no one has symptoms, air out the home, turn off fuel-burning appliances and reset the carbon monoxide alarm. If elevated levels remain, the alarm will sound again after approximately six minutes. If the alarm sounds again, call a qualified heating contractor for inspection. Don't use any fuel-burning appliances until they have been inspected.
- Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include:
 - Flue like symptoms, with no fever
 - Nausea, vomiting
 - Dizziness
 - Irregular breathing
 - Confusion
 - Feeling better after leaving a particular structure, but feeling ill upon return.
 - Fainting
 - Fatigue and weakness
 - Drowsiness
 - Headache
 - Confusion

Precautions when using a generator:

- Never use gasoline or diesel powered electric generators in an enclosed area.
- Always operate a generator outside, in a well ventilated location—away from all doors, windows, and vent openings so that exhaust fumes cannot enter the home through windows or other building openings.
- Do NOT refuel a generator while it is running. The generator should be turned off and allowed to cool down before being refueled.
- Fuel for the generator should never be stored in the home. Gasoline and other flammable liquids should be stored outside of living areas in properly labeled safety containers, away from any fuel-burning appliances such as a gas hot water heater.

- Appliances should be plugged directly into the generator or a heavy duty outdoor extension cord.
- The cord should be checked for cuts or tears, and to ensure the plug has all three prongs, especially the grounding pin.
- Use the appropriate size and type of power cords to carry the electrical load. Overloaded cords can overheat and cause fires.
- Never run cords under rugs or carpets where heat might build up or damage to a cord may go unnoticed.
- Never connect generators to another power source such as power lines. The reverse flow of electricity or “back feed” can electrocute an unsuspecting utility worker.
- The house wiring should not be powered by plugging the generator into a wall outlet. If the generator must be connected to the house wiring to power appliances, a qualified electrician should install a properly rated transfer switch.
- Remember that FEMA does NOT reimburse generator purchases, except in extremely rare circumstances or for documented medical or extraordinary needs.

For more information on carbon monoxide and the safe use of generators, read this Consumer Product Safety Commission publication at: www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PUBS/portgend.html.

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