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Ottawa Journal - Protect Your Home from Carbon Monoxide

The last few weeks of winter have proven to be quite cold, which means turning our furnaces up and burning more wood to keep our homes warm.

However, this can also mean our risk of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning can increase.

Fortunately, by knowing what CO is, the health risks it poses, and what steps we can take to protect ourselves from CO poisoning, we can heat our homes safely and have peace of mind.

Sadly, each year in this country, there are Canadians who die or become sick due to CO poisoning.

CO is a noxious gas and doesn't have any colour, smell, or taste, which is why it is often referred to as the ?silent killer.?

It's present when fuels, such as propane, natural gas, gasoline, oil, coal, and wood are burned.

It is also present in second-hand smoke. The gas may be found at any time of the year in your home or cottage; however, the risk is raised in the winter months since many Canadians heat their homes using furnaces, water heaters/boilers, wood stoves, as well as other appliances which use fuel to operate. Unfortunately, if any of these appliances or devices aren't installed correctly or happen to malfunction, CO can be discharged throughout your home.

CO can also be released from vehicle exhaust, blocked chimney flues, fuel-burning cooking appliances, and charcoal grills used in a home, cottage, tent, camper, garage, or other unventilated areas.

There are many health risks associated with CO and, frighteningly, it can pose a serious risk to your health before you realize its presence.

The impact of CO is a reduction in your body's capacity to move oxygen in your blood. According to Health Canada, some of the very serious health risks posed by CO exposure include: at low levels, it can cause headaches, tiredness, shortness of breath, and impaired motor functions (symptoms which can mimic the flu); at high levels or if someone is exposed to the gas for an extended period of time, it can produce symptoms of dizziness, chest pain, tiredness, poor vision, and difficulty thinking; at very high levels, exposure can lead to convulsions, coma, and death.

It is important to remember that CO can only be detected by a CO detector.

There are steps you can take to protect yourself and your loved ones. Health Canada has several safety tips. Good maintenance on fuel-burning appliances and devices is important because CO detectors may not detect low levels of CO.

This maintenance should also include an inspection by a professional at least once a year. It is also important to keep in mind that during and following a snow storm, to always check exhaust vents for your dryer, furnace, wood-burning or gas stove, fireplace, and heat recovery ventilator, to ensure they are cleared of snow.

Furthermore, exhaust vents and flues for all fuel-burning and propane and natural gas-powered appliances must be checked on a regular basis to safeguard against obstructions or debris which could cause a fire.

Secondly, put at least one Canadian Standards Association (CSA) approved CO detector with an alarm (to allow you to hear the warning of high CO levels) in your home, in addition to a fire alarm. Furthermore, follow the manufacturer's installation, testing, use, and replacement instructions and test the detector(s) regularly.

Thirdly, never use a BBQ or portable fuel-burning camping equipment inside your home, garage, vehicle, camper, or tent. Do not

use kerosene oil or oil space heaters or lamps in enclosed areas unless they've been specifically designed for such a purpose and never allow people to smoke indoors.

Lastly, do not idle vehicles in the garage, even if the garage door is open and never operate gas-powered lawnmowers, trimmers, snow blowers, generators, or other equipment in the garage, and always keep the door between your home and the garage closed.

If your CO detector does sound, leave your home immediately and rush to fresh air. Once outside, call 911, your fire department, or emergency services. Never try to locate the source of the CO and do not go back into your home until the problem has been resolved by a professional.

CO can pose serious health risks to all of us. However, by taking the necessary precautions, we can reduce our risk of exposure substantially and remain warm and safe throughout the winter months. For more information, please visit the Healthy Canadians website at healthycanadians.gc.ca.

by David Tilson, M.P.