



## Carbon monoxide... the silent killer

It's February, the middle of winter and prime home heating season. While a rumbling furnace may be music to our frostbitten ears, it's important to respect the silent threat our heat sources may pose.

Because so many of us heat our homes with carbon-based fuels such as wood, oil, propane or natural gas, we need to be aware that our heat sources carry the potential for carbon monoxide leaks. Other possible risk sources include charcoal grills, diesel generators, kerosene lamps and heaters and any other appliance that operates on combustion. If these appliances aren't properly vented and maintained, a buildup of carbon monoxide may result.

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a tasteless, odourless, colourless gas that's produced when fuels don't receive enough air to burn up completely. Since you can't see it, smell it or taste it, CO can kill before its presence is even detected. Tragically, its nickname "the silent killer" is well deserved.

CO enters your body when you inhale, making its way to your lungs where it prevents the delivery of oxygen to the rest of the body. Once the body's normal supply of oxygen is interrupted, the functioning of oxygen-dependent cells and organs like the heart and brain quickly begins to suffer.

The symptoms of CO poisoning mimic those of the flu. Since home heating season—the main cause of CO poisoning—occurs during flu season it's not surprising that CO poisoning is often misdiagnosed as influenza. It's important to know how to distinguish between the two. The following chart outlines their main differences:

CONDITION	CO POISONING	FLU
<i>Symptoms improve after leaving environment</i>	Yes	No
<i>Several people have same degree of illness at same time</i>	Yes	No
<i>Pets appear ill</i>	Yes	No
<i>Fever</i>	No	Yes
<i>Muscle aches</i>	No	Yes
<i>Swollen lymph nodes</i>	No	Yes

As shown in the table below, symptoms can vary in type and severity depending on the level of carbon monoxide in the air. **No level of CO concentration is safe.**

LEVEL OF CO CONCENTRATION	SYMPTOM
Low	Slight headache, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea
Moderate	Severe headache, confusion, dizziness, impaired vision and hearing, collapse or fainting
High	Loss of consciousness, coma, death

Additional symptoms of CO poisoning include coughing, fatigue, disorientation, hallucinations and vomiting.

If you suspect you or others may have symptoms of CO poisoning, leave the area immediately—evacuate everyone, including pets. Go outside into the fresh air and don't allow anyone to enter the area you just left. Contact the authorities for assistance.

In mild cases, the effects of CO exposure usually begin to wear off once fresh air is introduced. In severe cases, long-term brain and nerve damage can occur, even with proper medical attention. Awareness and prevention are your best protection.

### Reduce your risk. Never:

- Allow a car to idle in a garage, even with the garage door open
- Run a gas-powered generator in an enclosed space
- Use a charcoal grill indoors
- Neglect maintenance on appliances that run on gas, oil, wood or propane—and always ensure their venting systems are in good working order