

Protect Your Home from this “Silent Killer”

It's important to safeguard your home from carbon monoxide (CO) gas because it is impossible to see, taste, or smell the toxic fumes of CO. Therefore, it is often called the silent killer since it can kill you before you are aware it is in your home. CO accidentally kills about 170 Americans each year. About 70 of those deaths were associated with home heating equipment. In addition, several thousand people go to hospital emergency rooms each year to be treated for CO poisoning.

A few months ago, an Oregon family purchased—as part of a school fundraiser—a Thanksgiving weekend getaway in an \$8.9 million home in Colorado. Carbon monoxide leaked into the home from a snowmelt system in the crawl space causing the deaths of the parents and their children (ages 10 and 8).

In another instance, the mother of someone I've known for years had health and memory issues. This prompted the family to place a CO detector in her Oakhurst home to determine if CO was a possible factor. Within 24 hours, the meter registered 280. The manufacturer's instructions state that 100 is considered hazardous. Thus, she left the dwelling at once. It is fortunate that this family thought to even test for CO. They are currently working with a local HVAC (heating, ventilating, and air conditioning) company trying to determine the cause of the readings the detector obtained.

Most confuse the symptoms of CO exposure with the flu or food poisoning as the symptoms are similar. Exposure to CO can impede coordination, worsen cardiovascular conditions, and produce fatigue, headache, weakness, confusion, disorientation, nausea, and dizziness. High levels of CO exposure can result in death.

Thirteen states have laws mandating the use of CO detectors; California is not one of them. Our state requires smoke detectors but not ones for CO. Placement of the detectors is crucial. Homeowners should not install CO detectors directly above or beside fuel-burning appliances, as appliances may emit a small amount of CO upon start-up. A detector should not be placed within 15 feet of heating or cooking appliances or in or near very humid areas such as bathrooms. CO rises with warmer air temperatures and so mounting the device on or near the ceiling is often recommended. Additional detectors on every level and in every bedroom of a home provide extra protection.

Ken Card, with Advanced Home Inspections, said that improper or weakened furnace seals are a common occurrence, especially in older homes. Review of your furnace is recommended as a cautionary measure to protect the inhabitants of the home from the possible mixing of combustion gases, such as CO, with the circulating air in your home. If your home inspector or HVAC professional advises repair, immediate attention to this concern is recommended. “When completed, you can call the gas company for a final inspection,” said Card.

Card added, “One way this fatal mixture can occur is through small gaps at the base of the furnace. This is where the air from your home is drawn into the furnace to be reheated and then blown back into the rooms of your home. The blower unit performs this function by creating a vacuum. If the base of the furnace is not sealed to the platform, this vacuum can pull exhaust gases from the furnace into the air stream. These exhaust fumes can then be circulated to every heat register in the house, to the obvious detriment of you and your family.”

A CO hazard, especially in our mountain area, also includes chimneys, which can be blocked by birds' or squirrels' nests. This can cause deadly CO gas to enter a home. This danger can be lessened by having chimneys professionally cleaned each year.

Homeowners should be aware of the risks of CO exposure. CO is produced as a result of incomplete burning of carbon-containing fuels including coal, wood, charcoal, natural gas, propane, and fuel oil. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, CO can be emitted by combustion sources such as unvented kerosene and gas space heaters; leaking chimneys and furnaces; back-drafting from furnaces, gas water heaters, wood stoves, and fireplaces; gas stoves; generators and other gasoline powered equipment; automobile exhaust from attached garages; and tobacco smoke.

Visit the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) website for information on CO at <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PUBS/466.html>. One of the items on the site includes what you should do when the CO alarm sounds. Most importantly, it stresses that you should never ignore an alarming CO detector. It is warning you of a potentially deadly hazard. If the alarm signal sounds, do not try to find the source of the CO. Instead, immediately move outside to fresh air and call 911. After calling 911, do a head count to check that all persons are accounted for. Do not reenter the home until emergency services responders have given you permission. You could lose consciousness and die if you go in the home. If the source of the CO is determined to be a malfunctioning appliance, do not operate that appliance until it has been properly serviced by trained personnel. Also, make sure that motor vehicles are not, and have not been, operating in an attached garage or adjacent to the residence.

CPSC also urges consumers to have a professional inspection of all fuel-burning appliances—including furnaces, stoves, fireplaces, clothes dryers, water heaters, and space heaters—to detect deadly CO leaks. CPSC recommends that every home should have at least one CO detector that meets the requirements of the most recent Underwriters Laboratories (UL) 2034 standard or International Approval Services 6-96 standard.

Beverly Scott, President

Yosemite Gateway Association of REALTORS®

www.ygaor.com – *Your Gateway to Real Estate*