

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Carbon monoxide (CO) is known as the “Silent Killer.” Thousands of people seek medical attention annually. More than 500 die each year. It is responsible for more deaths than any other poison.

It is produced from incomplete combustion of fuels such as coal, fuel oil, natural gas, kerosene and propane. Most accidents occur from malfunctioning heat systems, hot water heaters or inadequate ventilation. Another major source is the automobile. Car exhaust contains high levels that can cause loss of consciousness within minutes.

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless and tasteless gas. Mild poisoning can cause symptoms such as nausea, dizziness or headaches. Large amounts can kill within minutes. More serious symptoms include tightness across the chest, lack of coordination and confusion.

Unfortunately, many of these symptoms are mistaken for flu-like illnesses.

To reduce the risks in the work place: Inspect ventilation systems on a regular basis. An annual check up on furnaces, boilers and heating units by a licensed technician. Install carbon monoxide monitors and test regularly. Instruct staff in the hazards and train them in the proper use of respirators.

Remember that the first step in treating CO poisoning is to remove the victim to fresh air, then seek medical attention.

Note: The OSHA standard for exposure prohibits workers’ exposure to more than 35 parts to gas per million part of air (ppm) averaged over an 8-hour workday.

Article By John Falvey, HMEA Board of Directors