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Common sense helps avoid carbon monoxide poisoning

BY ALEX FRAZER-HARRISON, FOR NEIGHBOURS MARCH 26, 2009

In the schoolyard, the term "silent but deadly" evokes giggles.

But when it comes to carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning, it's no laughing matter.

Every year, there are tragic stories about people being killed by the odourless, colourless gas in their own homes, such as an elderly Calgary couple who died in a December 2007 incident that sent nine others-- eight of them first responders--to hospital.

A vehicle left running in the garage was blamed. In other cases, malfunctioning or aging furnaces and gas-burning appliances have been the cause.

But with a little preventive maintenance and common sense, your family's chance of being endangered by carbon monoxide poisoning can be reduced.

"The problem with carbon monoxide is it's colourless, odourless and poisonous," says Jeff Budai, public information officer for the Calgary Fire Department.

"We consider it a huge problem because one fatality is too many. Prevention is the best line of defence."

Last year, the fire department was involved in more than 1,000 carbon monoxide investigations, ranging from actual CO exposure incidents to false alarms--up significantly from 600 investigations in 2007.

Although Budai says attributing the rise to any one factor would be pure speculation, increased awareness of the dangers of carbon monoxide--and the use of specialized CO detectors--was likely part of it.

While most of the incidents that make headlines are tragic ones where residents have been suddenly overcome, for many more it can be a gradual process, with symptoms often mistaken for flu or even the common cold, says Kyle Lumsden, owner of ClearView Plumbing and Heating.

"I think the long-term effects of carbon monoxide poisoning are equally as deadly or frustrating," he says. "People are blaming it on, 'Oh, my kids are in nursery school so I'm picking up colds from them,' or in senior years thinking you're picking it up from your grandkids when in fact it's coming from your house."

CO poisoning can mimic other illnesses, says Stuart Brideaux, public education officer with Calgary EMS: "Simply feeling unwell, headache, mild nausea, fatigue, and aches and pains. As the level of CO increases in the blood, you get things like central nervous system impairment, inability to think properly and inability to properly do motor acts like handling your keys."

As more carbon monoxide replaces the oxygen in your blood, it can get to the point where you can become disoriented and lapse into unconsciousness.

Without someone to remove you from the area, death could follow.

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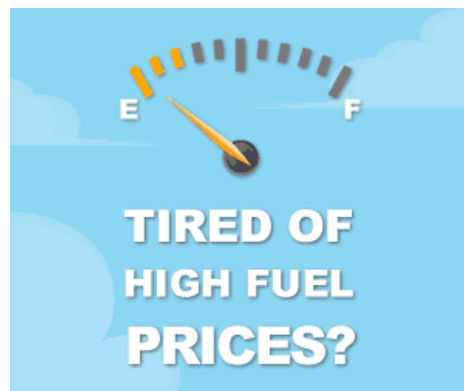
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"We have a sensor in our ambulances that can measure the percentage of red blood cells that are now saturated with CO," says Brideaux. "Even a single-digit percentage requires hospital transport. Double-digit and low teens can be fatal."

Budai says one red flag is if the flu-like symptoms begin hitting more than one member of the household.

Improperly maintained gas-burning appliances such as stoves can be one source of carbon monoxide, with one of the biggest contributors being the furnace.

"Good, bad, or indifferent, one of the biggest weaknesses in a furnace is the heat exchanger," says Lumsden.

"If it has a crack in it, it could potentially allow carbon monoxide to go into the living space--and that's dangerous.

"Some people feel changing the (furnace) filter is all the maintenance necessary. That's only part of it; if a customer were to change the filter every month to two months and get the furnace inspected every year or every second year, they'd be in less trouble than someone who didn't keep to a maintenance schedule."

That's because by not changing the filters and having the furnace checked, you may be putting added stress on the heat exchanger, increasing the chances of failure, says Lumsden--adding his company uses an ultraviolet dye, mirrors and cameras to reveal any cracks in the system.

There's no cookie-cutter formula for knowing when a furnace needs to be replaced or serviced. While Lumsden says industry standards peg the average life expectancy of a modern furnace at 12 years, he's seen well-maintained, safe furnaces that are more than 25 years old--and he has had to replace the heat exchanger on a furnace a mere 18 months old.

Lumsden says the key is to set up a regular furnace inspection and maintenance schedule, either following manufacturers' warranties or based upon initial inspection.

Having a working carbon monoxide detector-- which different from a standard smoke detector (although combination units exist)--placed in every living space is an important line of defence, says Budai.

If the detector goes off, call 911, but if the symptoms described above begin affecting you, alarm or no alarm, call for help and get out into the fresh air, he says.

In some cases, by the time there's enough CO in the air to trip the detector, it's already a problem.

The best defence combines regular maintenance and inspection of appliances and furnaces with properly placed CO detectors --and, like smoke detectors, make sure the batteries are changed regularly, Lumsden also recommends CO detectors be replaced every five years or so. Both he and Budai recommend detectors that are battery powered, with plug-in backups.

"It's cheap insurance," says Lumsden.

"My concern is people who know they have problems with an appliance and say, 'I'll just get a CO detector' and do nothing about the problem. I think that's foolish."