

Carbon Monoxide Detectors

Preventing the leading cause of accidental poisoning

What is Carbon Monoxide?

Carbon monoxide is an odorless, tasteless, invisible gas. This significantly toxic gas results from incomplete combustion from any flame-fueled device, including ranges, ovens, clothes dryers, furnaces, fireplaces, grills, space heaters, vehicles, and water heaters. Furnaces and water heaters may be sources of carbon monoxide, but if they are vented properly the carbon monoxide will escape to the outside. Carbon monoxide is present in low levels in the air. Open flames, such as from ovens and ranges, are the most common source of carbon monoxide; however, vehicles are the most common cause of carbon monoxide poisoning. According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, carbon monoxide poisoning is the leading cause of accidental poisoning deaths in America.

Why is Carbon Monoxide Dangerous?

When carbon monoxide is inhaled, the body becomes oxygen-starved, which can result in tissue damage and death. Low levels of carbon monoxide poisoning cause symptoms similar to those of the flu or a cold, including shortness of breath on mild exertion, mild headaches, and nausea. Higher levels of poisoning lead to dizziness, mental confusion, severe headaches, nausea, and fainting on mild exertion. Domestic carbon monoxide poisoning can be prevented by early detection with the use of household carbon monoxide detectors. These detectors are set to sound an alarm before the exposure to carbon monoxide would present a hazard to a healthy adult.

How Do Carbon Monoxide Detectors Work?

Since CO is colorless, tasteless and odorless (unlike smoke from a fire), detection in a home environment is impossible without a specialized warning device. These detectors trigger an alarm based on an accumulation of carbon monoxide over time. CO detectors do not serve as smoke detectors and vice versa. However, dual smoke/CO detectors are also sold. Carbon monoxide detectors require a continuous power supply, so if the power cuts off then the alarm becomes ineffective. Models are available that offer back-up battery power.



Carbon Monoxide Detector

Where Should I Place a Carbon Monoxide Detector?

Proper placement of a carbon monoxide detector is important. If you are installing only one carbon monoxide detector, the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) recommends it be located near the sleeping area, where it can wake you if you are asleep. Additional detectors on every level and in every bedroom of a home provide extra protection.

Because carbon monoxide is roughly the same weight as air it may be found with warm, rising air. Therefore, it is usually recommended that detectors be placed on a wall at least 5 feet above the floor. Also, the detector may be placed on the ceiling. Do not place the detector right next to or over a fireplace or flame-producing appliance. Make certain the alarm is loud enough to wake you up.

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Installation locations vary by manufacturer. Manufacturers' recommendations differ to a certain degree based on research conducted with each one's specific detector. Therefore, make sure to read the provided product manual for each detector before installing.

What Do I Do if the Alarm Sounds?

Don't ignore the alarm! It is intended to go off *before* you are experiencing symptoms. If the alarm goes off, turn off all fuel-burning appliances or other sources of combustion at once. Immediately get fresh air into the premises by opening doors and windows. Silence the alarm and ask all members of the household whether anyone is experiencing any of the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning. If anyone is experiencing symptoms of CO poisoning, call 911. If no one has symptoms, continue to ventilate the building, identify and remedy the source of the carbon monoxide before re-occupying the home, and have appliances and chimneys checked by qualified professionals as soon as possible.

Additional Carbon Monoxide Concerns and Other Information

Don't automatically assume that you don't need a carbon monoxide detector. Also, don't assume that you are safe from carbon monoxide poisoning just because you have a detector installed. Carbon monoxide detectors are intended to protect healthy adults, so take the ages and health of family members into account when assessing the effectiveness of a detector. Also, be aware that the average life span of many carbon monoxide detectors is about 2 years. The 'test' feature on many detectors checks the functioning of the alarm and not the status of the detector. It's a good idea to have a qualified professional check all of your gas appliances. During real estate transactions, a home inspector usually tests gas appliances using a combustible gas detection instrument. This is a device that senses hydrocarbons, spillage of combustion products and raw gas leaks and can uncover combustion products in the house air.

Our homeowner tips are only general guidelines. Since each situation is different, please consult with a specialist regarding your questions or specific issue. More home safety and maintenance information is available online at www.national-inspection.com.

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