



What you should know about Carbon Monoxide

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Carbon Monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas. Carbon Monoxide is created by the incomplete combustion of fossil fuels such as natural gas, propane, methane and fuel oil. Solid fuels like wood and coal can also produce carbon monoxide.

The effects of a person's exposure to carbon monoxide gas depend on the concentration (measured in parts per million or PPM) and the exposure time. Short term exposure to high levels of carbon monoxide can cause dizziness, loss of consciousness and death. Long term exposure to low levels can produce the same effects. The symptoms of long term exposure to low levels can be difficult to diagnose. Studies have shown that one effect of carbon monoxide exposure is damage to the heart muscle. One significant exposure can cause damage to the heart which can result in shortened life span. One exposure may also be enough to cause damage to an unborn fetus. Immediate medical attention should be sought if you have been exposed to carbon monoxide.

Carbon monoxide test instruments are used to test the levels of carbon monoxide in room air and also in the products of combustion which are emitted from fuel burning appliances. These instruments are sensitive enough to detect levels as low as 1PPM and depending on the instrument may be used to measure levels up to 10,000 PPM and higher. These instruments can be fairly expensive and are mostly used by professionals.

Carbon monoxide alarms are available for residential use. These units are reasonably priced and can be purchased from many major retailers or from your heating or home performance contractor. As with any product that comes at a lower cost there is usually a down side and that is that the sensors in these alarms are not as sensitive or durable as commercial units. Some alarms may take long periods of time to alarm at low levels and under 60 PPM may not alarm at all. The Occupational Safety and Health Administrations (OSHA) standard for exposure is a maximum of 9 PPM for a period of 8 hours. Being exposed to even that low level for a longer period of time can be very dangerous and the main goal of every homeowner should be to never be exposed to any carbon monoxide at all.

A new law went into effect in New York State on March 1st 2010. The law named Amanda's law was inspired due to the tragic death of a young girl who was a guest staying overnight at a friend's home. The heating boiler in this home was producing carbon monoxide. The presence of an alarm in this home may have alerted the occupants in time to have prevented this. The law basically says that all homes have to have a carbon monoxide alarm on each level of the house that has an appliance that may produce carbon monoxide and one on each sleeping level.

Carbon monoxide alarms can limit the incidence of immediate loss of life in the event of a high level exposure to carbon monoxide and limit the length of exposure and the damage that can be done from long term exposure to low levels. Alarms however should be your second line of defense. If your alarm needs to alert you to the presence of carbon monoxide then you have already been exposed and there may be future consequences.

I recommend every homeowner have all fuel burning appliances checked annually by a qualified professional, purchase and install the proper number of alarms for your home and be sure to read and follow all the manufacturer's instructions provided with your carbon monoxide alarms. Be proactive in protecting yourself and others from the negative effects of this invisible silent killer.