



Central Office: 505 Silas Deane Highway, Wethersfield, CT 06109 Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823

Berlin: 240 Kensington Road, Berlin, CT 06037 Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248

Newington: 131 Cedar Street, Newington, CT 06111 Phone (860) 665-8586 Fax (860) 665-8533

Rocky Hill: 761 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067 Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax (860) 258-2767

www.ccthd.org

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Is It Flu or Carbon Monoxide Poisoning?

Every winter, many people suffer with headaches, muscle aches, nausea, drowsiness, and respiratory problems. These symptoms can result from a variety of illnesses, including a cold or influenza. They also may be caused by carbon monoxide poisoning. According to the Connecticut Department of Public Health, every year hundreds of people in this state require medical attention as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning. On average, carbon monoxide kills about 6 people in Connecticut annually.

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas that causes flu-like symptoms, and is produced by anything in the house that burns fuel. When installed and maintained properly, very little carbon monoxide is produced by appliances and vehicles. However, when they are not functioning well and have not been installed or used properly, carbon monoxide can be released into the air by furnaces that are not properly ventilated, kerosene and propane space heaters, wood and gas fireplaces, wood and pellet burning stoves, generators, hot water heaters, and gas appliances like ovens, stoves, and clothes dryers. Motor vehicles and yard equipment such as snow blowers, chain saws, and lawn mowers that are started or used in the garage also emit this gas, and can be of particular concern when the garage is under another room in the house or attached to the home. Also, second hand tobacco smoke contains carbon monoxide, and exposure should be avoided. With structural ventilation reduced and people staying indoors more in cold weather, carbon monoxide can build up and cause illness and death.

The symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning often resemble the flu or other illnesses, so it may be difficult for a doctor to treat this condition as first. When an ill person feels better upon leaving the building, it could be a clue that this gas may be present in unhealthy levels. When carbon monoxide exists at low levels, headache, fatigue, sleepiness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, confusion, blurred vision, fainting, , confusion, trouble breathing, and tightness in the chest may result. At higher levels of exposure, a person may lose consciousness, lapse into a coma, or even die.

If you or anyone in your house or workplace develops any of these symptoms, be sure to get fresh air immediately, call 9-1-1 from outside or another building, and seek medical attention even if the symptoms disappear. Then have a professional from the utility company or other qualified company inspect the building to determine if carbon monoxide is present, and to locate the source of the problem.

To prevent carbon monoxide from building up in your home, follow these recommendations:

- Be sure to maintain furnaces, oil and gas-fired water heaters, fireplaces and chimneys.
- Do not “button-up” your house so tightly that it is not adequately ventilated. (Refer to the owner’s manual provided with every heating device to determine the amount of air required for safe operation.)
- Avoid using unvented kerosene and gas heaters.

- Do not use charcoal or gas grills indoors (even if there is a power failure).
- Do not use gas ovens as a source of heat.
- Never go to bed with a fire burning or smoldering in a stove or fireplace.
- When using an emergency generator, be sure to place it outdoors or in a well-ventilated area outside of the living area. (Do not place them in basements or attached garages.)
- Install a carbon monoxide detector. It will sound an alarm before the gas can reach dangerous levels. Test and maintain the detector, changing the battery as often as recommended by the manufacturer. Replace the detector every five years.
- Have your heating system inspected and cleaned every year.

The Central Connecticut Health District has a supply of booklets “About Carbon Monoxide” available to anyone interested in obtaining more information at no charge. Contact the Health District at 860-721-2824 or www.ccthd.org to obtain a copy or stop by the main office in the Wethersfield Town Hall at 505 Silas Deane Highway. For additional information, contact the Connecticut Department of Public Health Environmental Health Section at 860-509-7742 or www.dph.state.ct.us, the Connecticut Poison Control Center at 800-222-2333 or <http://poisoncontrol.uchc.edu>, or the American Lung Association at 860-289-5401 or www.lungct.org.