

## **HEALTH OFFICIALS WARN OF CARBON MONOXIDE DANGERS DURING AND AFTER WINTER STORMS**

(Christiansburg, VA) — The effects of last month’s severe storm, and the lingering arctic weather that has settled across southwest Virginia in recent weeks, reminds us of special precautions that are necessary to protect yourself and those you love during and after periods of severe cold weather.

“In the days following winter storms, we commonly see an unfortunate and unnecessary increase in the number of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning cases and fatalities,” said Dr. Jody Hershey, Director of the New River Health District, Virginia Department of Health. “During power outages, many Virginians use gas-powered appliances and generators to provide electricity and heat. The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) urges anyone using these alternate power sources to CO exposure, which can be a silent killer after a storm.”

“Kerosene heaters and oil lamps also can produce CO and should not be burned unattended while sleeping,” continued Dr. Dwight Flammia, Public Health Toxicologist, Division of Environmental Epidemiology, VDH. “Remember that a well-insulated room is a poorly-ventilated one. With a fireplace or any type of combustion, oxygen may be consumed more quickly than it is replenished. Many manufacturers suggest cracking a window near an oil lamp or kerosene heater. While this can improve combustion, it doesn’t prevent CO buildup, particularly from devices not intended to be used indoors.”

You can’t see or smell CO, but at high levels it can kill a person in minutes. CO is produced whenever any fuel such as gas, oil, kerosene, wood, or charcoal is burned. In properly-maintained appliances, the amount of CO produced is usually not hazardous. However, if appliances are not working properly or are used incorrectly, dangerous levels of CO can result. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, hundreds of people die accidentally every year from CO poisoning caused by malfunctioning or improperly used fuel-burning appliances. Even more die from CO produced by idling cars. Fetuses, infants, elderly people, and people with anemia or with a history of heart or respiratory disease can be especially susceptible.

Know the symptoms of CO poisoning. At moderate levels, you can suffer severe headaches or chest pains, blurred vision, dizziness, confusion, nausea, weakness, or fatigue. You can lose consciousness and even die if these levels persist for a long time. Low levels of CO can cause milder symptoms, but may have longer term effects on health. Since many of these symptoms are similar to those of the flu, food poisoning, or other illnesses, you may not think that CO poisoning could be the cause.

Be safe. Practice the DOs and DON’Ts of carbon monoxide.

- DON’T burn charcoal or gas grills inside a house, garage, vehicle, tent or fireplace.

- DON'T use a generator indoors, including garages, basements, crawl spaces and enclosed or partially enclosed areas, even with ventilation. Opening doors and windows or using fans will not prevent CO build-up in the home.
- DO locate the unit outdoors on a dry surface, away from doors, windows, vents and heating and air-conditioning equipment that could allow CO to come indoors.
- DO follow the manufacturer's instructions. Place generators outdoors and away from doors, windows, vents, and heating and air conditioning equipment that could allow CO to come indoors.
- DO have your home heating system (including chimneys and flues) inspected each year. Chimneys should be cleaned to minimize the risk of chimney fires.
- DO install battery-operated or plug-in CO detectors with battery back-up in your home, according to the manufacturer's instructions. The detectors should conform to the latest safety standards (UL 2034, IAS 6-96, or CSA 6.19.01).
- DO test your CO detectors frequently. Replace dead batteries.

If a detector indicates high levels of CO, leave the building immediately and call 911. Remember that you cannot see or smell CO and portable generators can produce high levels of CO very quickly. If you experience symptoms that you think could be from CO poisoning:

- DO get fresh air immediately. Open doors and windows. Turn off combustion appliances and leave the house.
- DO go to the emergency room and tell the physician you suspect CO poisoning, which can often be diagnosed by a blood test done soon after exposure.

Prevention is the key to avoiding CO poisoning.

- DO have wood-, oil-, kerosene-, or gas-burning appliances - including furnaces, water heaters, ranges and ovens, dryers, space heaters, fireplaces, and stoves – professionally inspected before each heating season. Be sure that flues and chimneys are in good condition and not blocked.
- DO use appliances that vent fumes outside whenever possible, have them properly installed, and maintain them according to manufacturer's instructions.
- DO read and follow all of the instructions and precautions for any fuel-burning device. Use the proper fuel and crack windows for ventilation and proper combustion.
- DON'T idle the car inside a garage - even with the door open. Fumes can build up very quickly.
- DON'T use a gas oven to heat your home.
- DON'T ever use a charcoal grill indoors.
- DON'T sleep in any room with an unvented gas or kerosene space heater.
- DON'T use any gasoline-powered engines (mowers, weed trimmers, snow blowers, chain saws, small engines or generators) in closed spaces.
- DON'T ignore symptoms of CO poisoning, particularly if more than one person is feeling them. Do nothing, and you can lose consciousness and die.

For more tips for protecting yourself and your family before, during, and after winter storms and other natural disasters, visit VDH online at [www.vdh.virginia.gov](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov), or the Virginia Department of Emergency Management at [www.readyvirginia.gov](http://www.readyvirginia.gov).