

Carbon-monoxide detectors provide early warning

It's called the silent killer, and it may be lurking in your house. Carbon monoxide — odorless, colorless and deadly — is an increasing concern to homeowners across the province. Once thought of as a problem confined to garages and automobiles, today's airtight, energy efficient homes are moving the threat of carbon monoxide poisoning indoors.

The most frightening aspect of carbon monoxide (CO), is that it can kill in your home and in your sleep. Most victims are overcome without realizing they are being poisoned. CO acts on the bloodstream, robbing it of oxygen until a person becomes drowsy and incoherent, then ultimately passes out. At this stage, unless help arrives, death follows.

Excessive CO can be caused by many household appliances: gas or oil furnaces, water heaters, and even refrigerators and clothes dry-

ers. Especially dangerous are clogged chimneys or furnace vents, fireplaces, and wood stoves.

Among the most common causes of unsafe levels are chimneys which have become blocked and broken furnace vents. It is important to stress that many appliances can also be a problem if they malfunction.

Fortunately, there is something homeowners can do to prevent tragedy. One solution lies in new technology which has developed effective CO detectors. These devices, required by law since 1993 in any new home with a fireplace or wood stove, look and act much like our familiar smoke detectors. If an excessive CO level is detected, they emit a shrill alarm. Detectors sell at hardware stores for \$60 to \$70.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission recommends placing at least one unit close to the home's sleeping area, but fire departments

and manufacturers advise a second be installed next to the furnace.

While detectors offer a certain measure of protection, the other half of the safety equation is prevention. Most critical is to have a qualified service person check your furnace and inspect all chimneys. Even something as innocent as a bird's nest can compromise your chimney's ability to vent CO. Other items to check are furnace filters, thermostats, and clothes-dryer vents (actually, any vent to the outside can become clogged).

CO can also travel between attached dwellings and from indoor garages, so pay special attention to cracks or breaks in dividing walls. Because detection is relatively new in household use, standards are still being set. Usually, safe concentration is rated in parts per million (ppm) over a certain time period: for example,

35 ppm for eight hours is the Ontario workplace maximum. Residential standards are now being set and should be released soon.

In the meantime, some agencies, such as the Newmarket Fire Department, are setting their own. Newmarket earmarks a single measurement of more than 10 ppm as serious enough to cause concern.

Private companies, such as First Alert, are also paying a leading role. In addition to developing state-of-the-art detectors, they have an abundance of literature available which can be obtained by calling their consumer hotline at 1-800-772-1938. Local fire departments may also provide brochures and advice.

Whatever the means, now that the silent killer has spoken, all homeowners would be wise to undertake a CO assessment, buy a detector and let your family rest easy.

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