

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES **ADVISORY**

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Too Few Maine Homes Have Carbon Monoxide Detectors

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AUGUSTA. The Maine Center for Disease Control (Maine CDC, formerly Bureau of Health) in the Maine Department of Health and Human Services released survey and surveillance data today about carbon monoxide poisoning (CO) in Maine. “We have survey data showing that one one-in-three Maine households have a carbon monoxide detector,” said State Toxicologist Dr. Andrew Smith. About 140 Maine residents seek care at hospital emergency departments for CO poisoning each year.

Carbon monoxide is called the silent killer. It is a gas without color, odor, or taste, and is given off when any fuel is burned. Nationally, there are 200 deaths per year due to carbon monoxide poisoning. These deaths have resulted from leaking faulty furnaces or fuel-fired heaters, blocked chimney or flue, vehicles left running in an attached garage, charcoal burned inside the house, and gasoline powered generators operated in a home, attached garage or too close to windows or doors.

Based on a statewide survey of 3500 Maine households, 63 percent of respondents indicated that they did not have a CO detector in the home. “Families need to know that carbon monoxide detectors can save lives”, said Dr. Dora Mills, the State Health Officer and director of the ME CDC. The survey was undertaken as part of a new effort by the Maine CDC to develop a public health surveillance system for carbon monoxide poisoning. This effort is funded by the U.S. Center’s for Disease Control grant to develop an Environmental Public Health Tracking System. This new surveillance system found the following data about carbon monoxide poisoning in Maine:

- Every year, about 140 Maine residents are seen in hospital emergency departments or outpatient clinics for carbon monoxide poisoning;
- Most of these poisonings occur during the winter months;
- The home residence is the most commonly reported site of CO poisonings, though work-related CO poisonings were reported almost as often; and
- Domestic fuel and automotive exhaust are two of the more commonly reported sources of carbon monoxide gas.

“We learned from the January 1998 ice storm that large power outages can be accompanied by outbreaks of CO poisoning due to improper use and placement of gasoline powered generators,” said Dr. Smith. “Now we are learning that there are a significant number of CO poisoning in Maine every year that can be largely prevented if homes have working carbon monoxide detectors.”

Carbon monoxide detectors can be purchased at most hardware and retail stores for between \$30 and \$50. Look for the Underwriter's Laboratory "UL" mark with the "Single Station Carbon Monoxide Alarm" statement. The most current UL standard # 2034 has stricter requirements that the detector must meet before it sounds, decreasing nuisance alarms. Put up a CO detector/alarm in the hallway near every separate sleeping area of the home. Make sure furniture or draperies do not cover the detector. Detectors must be battery powered or have battery back-up, so they will still work during power outages.

What can you do to prevent CO poisoning?

- Put up a CO detector that meets the requirements of UL standard # 2034. Read all the manufacturers directions
- Have your heating system (including chimneys and vents) inspected and cleaned each year. The inspector must check chimneys and flues for blockages, corrosion, partial and complete disconnections, and loose connections. Keep power exhaust vents free of snow during winter months.
- Never leave a car running in an attached garage, even with the garage door open.
- Never use gas appliances such as ranges, ovens, or clothes dryers for heating your home.
- Never burn charcoal inside a home, garage, vehicle, or tent. Never use portable fuel-burning camping equipment inside a home, garage, vehicle, or tent.
- Never use unvented fuel-burning appliances in any room with closed doors or closed windows or in any room where people are sleeping.
- Only use gasoline powered tools or engines outdoors. If they must be used inside, be sure there is enough fresh air, and place the engine unit to vent directly outdoors. Make sure a CO detector is present and working.
- Always use gasoline-powered generators outdoors in a well-ventilated location, far away from home windows or doors.

What are the symptoms of CO poisoning?

The early symptoms of CO poisoning are like the flu (but no fever). They include: headache, nausea, fatigue, vomiting, dizziness, and shortness of breath.

What should you do if your CO detector sounds an alarm?

Call your fire department or 911. Go outside to breathe fresh air or stand by an open door/window. Never ignore a CO detector when it alarms.