

Carbon Monoxide Awareness: Protecting Your Home This Winter

As temperatures drop and homes rely more on furnaces, fireplaces, and space heaters, the risk of carbon monoxide (CO) exposure rises dramatically. Known as the “*silent killer*,” carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless gas that can cause sudden illness or death. Each winter, emergency departments across Pennsylvania treat individuals who unknowingly inhaled dangerous levels of CO—often caused by faulty heating systems or improper ventilation. This winter, the American Trauma Society, Pennsylvania Division urges families to take simple, proactive steps to prevent CO poisoning and keep their homes safe.

Why Carbon Monoxide Is So Dangerous

Because CO cannot be seen, smelled, or tasted, exposure often goes unnoticed until symptoms become severe. Early signs—headache, dizziness, nausea, and confusion—can resemble the flu, making it easy to overlook the danger. In high concentrations, CO can lead to loss of consciousness within minutes.

Carbon monoxide incidents are more common in winter because homes are sealed tightly, fuel-burning appliances work harder, and families rely on supplemental heating sources that may not be properly maintained.

Common Sources of CO in Winter

Many everyday appliances produce CO if they malfunction or are used incorrectly. The most frequent culprits include:

- **Furnaces and boilers**
Cracked heat exchangers or poor ventilation can cause CO to build up inside the home.
- **Fireplaces and wood stoves**
Blocked chimneys or improper combustion can allow CO to enter living spaces.
- **Gas stoves or ovens used for heating**
These appliances are not designed to heat a home and pose significant CO and fire risks.

- **Space heaters (fuel-burning models)**

Portable heaters must be used with extreme care and never in enclosed, unventilated areas.

- **Generators**

Running a generator indoors, in a garage, or near windows can lead to deadly CO levels in minutes.

Essential Steps to Protect Your Household

1. Install CO Alarms on Every Level of Your Home

Place alarms near sleeping areas and test them monthly. Replace batteries twice a year and the alarm unit every 5–7 years (or per manufacturer instructions).

2. Schedule an Annual Heating System Inspection

Have a qualified technician inspect your furnace, fireplace, and any fuel-burning appliance to ensure proper operation and ventilation.

3. Never Use Outdoor Equipment Indoors

Generators, grills, and portable stoves should *never* be used inside the home, basement, garage, or near open windows.

4. Keep Vents and Chimneys Clear

Snow, ice, and debris can block exhaust vents, preventing CO from escaping safely.

5. Use Space Heaters Safely

Only use heaters approved for indoor use, keep them at least three feet away from anything flammable, and ensure proper ventilation.

6. Avoid Warming Up Vehicles in Enclosed Spaces

Even with the garage door open, CO can build up quickly inside attached garages and seep into the home.

Recognizing the Symptoms of CO Poisoning

Early detection can save lives. Symptoms often mimic other winter illnesses, so take them seriously—especially if multiple people in the home experience them at the same time.

- Headache
- Dizziness

- Nausea or vomiting
- Confusion
- Weakness or fatigue
- Chest pain
- Loss of consciousness

If you suspect CO poisoning, **leave the home immediately**, call 911, and seek medical attention.

Stay Safe All Winter Long

Carbon monoxide incidents are preventable. With the right safety practice routine maintenance, proper ventilation, and reliable CO alarms—you can keep your family protected all winter. As part of our commitment to injury prevention, ATSPA encourages every household to check their alarms, schedule a heating inspection, and share these safety tips with neighbors and loved ones.

A warm home should always be a safe home. By staying informed and acting now, you can enjoy a healthy and worry-free winter season.