

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

What is Carbon Monoxide?

Carbon monoxide is a colourless, odourless, tasteless gas produced by the burning of almost any fuel including wood, charcoal and gasoline. Carbon monoxide poisoning usually results from the operation of gas or charcoal barbeques and gas or diesel engines including generators in unventilated or poorly ventilated areas.

Why is it dangerous?

Carbon monoxide competes with oxygen in the human body. Because it is 210 times stronger binding to blood than oxygen, it is a very powerful poison.

What are the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning?

Early symptoms include headache, nausea, shortness of breath and sometimes vomiting, diarrhea, confusion, clumsiness, fainting, inappropriate mood swings, irritability, and increased heart rate (pulse).

Symptoms of severe poisoning include blue-tinged skin and mucous membranes (cyanosis), full or partial blindness, chest pain, coma, abnormal heart rhythms, and heart failure. Only rarely do you see a cherry-red skin colour.

The progression of symptoms with increasing concentration of gas and length of exposure are as follows:

- Problems with coordination
- Headache and a feeling of tightness in the temples
- Throbbing headache with confusion and blurred vision
- Rapid breathing and pulse, fainting and loss of consciousness
- Deep coma, convulsions, shock and respiratory and heart failure

What to do if you suspect poisoning

If carbon monoxide poisoning is suspected, the person should be immediately removed from the source of the gas and medical attention should be sought without delay. Treatment involves the administration of high concentrations of oxygen. Delayed treatment can result in death or permanent damage to the brain and other vital organs.

Preventing carbon monoxide poisoning

- Do not use gas, propane, kerosene generators or gas fired heaters inside.
- Generators should be outside and a distance away from windows or open doors.
- Be sure the exhaust from the generator is blowing away from your house.
- Have your fuel burning equipment checked routinely for safety and efficiency by a qualified service technician.
- If you are adding a wood burning stove to a home, make sure the stove is properly installed and vented.

For more information regarding 'carbon monoxide poisoning', contact the Porcupine Health Unit office nearest you or call 1-800-461-1818.