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Be aware of the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning

Carbon monoxide poisoning may have caused the death of an 80-year-old Venice resident this past week after the man left his car running in his garage.

Often called the silent killer, carbon monoxide (CO) is an invisible, odorless and colorless gas created when fuels (such as gasoline, wood, coal, natural gas, propane, oil, and methane) burn incompletely.

In the home, heating and cooking equipment that burn fuel are potential sources of carbon monoxide. Vehicles or generators running in an attached garage also can produce dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. The risk of unintentional CO death is highest for the very old (ages 75 or above).

In 2005, fire departments throughout the United States responded to an estimated 61,100 non-fire CO incidents in which carbon monoxide was found, or an average of seven calls per hour. The number of incidents increased 18 percent from 51,700 incidents reported in 2003.

To prevent CO poisoning, Sarasota County Fire Marshal Jane Ross offers these safety tips:

- Install CO alarms (listed by an independent testing laboratory) inside the home in a central location outside each separate sleeping area to warn of accumulating CO.
- After purchasing an alarm, post 911 by all telephones and make sure everyone in the household knows to call this number regardless if it is a fire or CO emergency.
- Test CO alarms at least once a month, and replace CO alarms according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- If warming a vehicle, remove it from the garage immediately after starting it. Do not run a vehicle, generator, or other fueled engine or motor indoors even if garage doors are open. Never leave a vehicle running while it is parked.
- Have fuel-burning household heating equipment (fireplaces, furnaces, water heaters, wood and coal stoves, space or portable heaters) and chimneys inspected by a professional every year before cold weather arrives.
- When using a fireplace, open the flue for adequate ventilation.
- Open a window slightly whenever using a kerosene or gas heater. (Kerosene heaters are illegal in many states. Always check with local authorities before buying or using one.) Only refuel outside, after the device has cooled.

- Never use an oven to heat the home.
- Only use barbecue grills outside since they can produce CO. Never use grills in the home or garage.
- When purchasing new heating and cooking equipment, select products tested and labeled by an independent testing laboratory.
- When purchasing an existing home, have a qualified technician evaluate the integrity of the heating and cooking systems, and the sealed spaces between the garage and the house.
- When camping, only use battery-powered heaters and flashlights in tents, trailers and motor homes.
- CO alarms are not substitutes for smoke alarms. Smoke alarms should be installed on every level of the home and in or outside all sleeping areas.
- Know the difference between the sound of the smoke alarm and the CO alarm.

When the CO alarm sounds:

- If it is a battery-powered intermittent alarm, check the battery.
- If it is a steady alarm or the cause cannot be determined, evacuate the dwelling. Do not re-enter until the responding agency says it is okay.
- Report the CO alarm warning by calling 911.
- Call a qualified technician to inspect all equipment.

Symptoms of CO poisoning are:

- severe headache
- dizziness
- mental confusion
- nausea
- faintness

Many symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are similar to the flu, food poisoning or other illnesses.

For more information on carbon monoxide poisoning, call the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for the Public Safety Education Office or visit the county's website at www.scgov.net.

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