

Ten Steps that may save your family's life

by [Jeffrey P. Kerrane](#)

Carbon Monoxide (CO) is the most common poison in our environment, causing more deaths than any other poison. You can't see it, smell it, or taste it, but at high levels it can kill a person in minutes. Carbon monoxide is produced whenever any fuel such as gas, oil, kerosene, wood, or charcoal is burned. Hundreds of people die every year from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by malfunctioning or improperly used appliances, or from idling cars. Fetuses, infants, elderly people, and people with anemia or with a history of heart or respiratory disease can be especially susceptible.

When appliances that burn fuel are maintained and used properly, the amount of carbon monoxide produced is usually not hazardous. However, appliances that are not working properly or are used incorrectly can release dangerous levels of carbon monoxide.

Low levels of exposure can cause shortness of breath, mild nausea, and mild headaches, and may cause long term neurological damages. At moderate levels, symptoms include severe headaches, dizziness, confusion, nausea, or fainting. Moderate levels of exposure can even cause death if the exposure continues for a long time. Because many of these symptoms are similar to those of the flu, food poisoning, or other illnesses, you may not think that CO poisoning could be the cause.

To protect yourself and your family from carbon monoxide poisoning, follow these ten steps:

1. Get a carbon monoxide detector. Although most homes have smoke detectors, few homes are equipped with carbon monoxide detectors. However, don't let a carbon monoxide detector lull you into a false sense of security. The technology of carbon monoxide detectors is still developing, and they are not generally considered to be as reliable as the smoke detectors found in homes today. When you shop for a carbon monoxide detector, do some research on features and don't select solely on the basis of cost. Non-governmental organizations such as Consumers Union (publisher of *Consumer Reports*), the American Gas Association, and Underwriters Laboratories (UL) can help you make an informed decision. Look for UL certification on any detector you purchase.
2. Check your appliances. Check the flame color of your gas appliances. If the flame is orange, you do have a problem. However, a blue flame does not necessarily mean it is safe. Have your fuel-burning appliances, including oil and gas furnaces, gas water heaters, gas ranges and ovens, gas dryers, gas or kerosene space heaters, fireplaces, and wood stoves, inspected by a trained professional at the beginning of every heating season.
3. Check your fireplace. Whether you have a gas or wood burning fireplace, check the flue to make sure it is connected, in good condition, and not blocked. With gas burning fireplaces, the flue should remain open at all times, whether or not the fireplace is in use.

4. When were your appliances last checked? Do it every year don't leave it to chance. Remember the engineer can only check the conditions on the day that he attends, get protection year round, fit a CO detector with a low level alarm.
5. Choose the right appliances. Choose appliances that vent their fumes to the outside whenever possible, have them properly installed, and maintain them according to manufacturers' instructions.
6. Use caution with unvented gas or kerosene space heaters. If you cannot avoid using an unvented gas or kerosene space heater, carefully follow the cautions and instructions that come with the device. Use the proper fuel and keep doors to the rest of the house open. Crack a window to ensure enough air for ventilation and proper fuel-burning. Never sleep in any room with an unvented gas or kerosene space heater.
7. Never idle the car in a garage. Even if the garage door to the outside is open, fumes can build up very quickly in the garage and living area of your home.
8. Don't use a gas oven to heat your home, even for a short time.
9. Don't ever use a charcoal grill indoors -- even in a fireplace.
10. Be aware of carbon monoxide poisoning symptoms. If you or any family member suffer from any unexplained illnesses, such as shortness of breath, nausea, headaches, confusion, fainting, fatigue, muscle pains, upset stomach, lethargy, or dizziness, consider whether carbon monoxide poisoning may be the cause.

You can call the EPA's Indoor Air Quality Information Clearinghouse at (800) 438-4318 or the Consumer Product Safety Commission at (800) 638-2772 for more information on how to protect your family from carbon monoxide and other combustion gases and particles.