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Detectors Important in Preventing Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

The weather has changed and our furnaces are back on. This is the time of year to purchase a carbon monoxide detector for your home. Carbon monoxide poisoning is a serious problem that can result in fatal consequences.

Carbon monoxide poisoning occurs when there is incomplete combustion of hydrocarbon fuels. Hydrocarbon fuels include kerosene, heating oil, propane, and other fuels commonly used in home heating devices.

Burning fuel produces carbon dioxide and water when there is enough oxygen in the air for complete combustion. In an area with little or no ventilation, burning fuel uses up the oxygen, resulting in incomplete combustion and the production of carbon monoxide.

Carbon monoxide also is produced if the burner is dirty or the air and fuel mixing system is malfunctioning.

Carbon monoxide binds to hemoglobin in the blood preventing blood from carrying oxygen to all organs, including the brain. Victims of carbon monoxide poisoning become confused and often don’t realize what is happening.

It’s common for people to use supplemental heat during the winter. If you do, ventilate your rooms heated by open flame space heaters and stoves. If no fresh air enters an area with a flame type heater, combustion eventually depletes the oxygen.

Furnaces also can be the cause of carbon monoxide poisoning. Defective parts and cracks in the heat exchanger allow combustion gases to enter ducts.

Some furnaces are made with a special vent that directs additional air into the furnace for combustion. Have a service technician or a fuel supplier check the furnace on a regular schedule. At a minimum, have your furnace checked once a year.

Since carbon monoxide is colorless, tasteless, and odorless (unlike smoke from a fire), detection and prevention of carbon monoxide poisoning in a home environment is impossible without a carbon monoxide detector. Every home should have at least one carbon monoxide detector.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission recommends the detector be located near the sleeping area, where it can wake you when sleeping. Additional carbon monoxide detectors on every level and in every bedroom of a home provide extra protection against carbon monoxide poisoning.

If an alarm does detect carbon monoxide, open windows and doors for circulation and exit the area immediately. Call the fire department and immediately move to a location that has fresh air.

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