

# Keep your family safe from carbon monoxide poisoning



• Jesse Atwood, MD, pediatrician, Providence Matanuska Health Care

**YOU CAN'T SEE IT**, smell it or taste it, but carbon monoxide – a gas released when fuel is burned – can be deadly.

Wood, oil, gasoline, natural gas, kerosene and coal all produce CO. In your home, CO can come from a variety of things, such as a heating system, cooking appliance or fireplace. It's also present in fumes from vehicles, small engines and barbecues.

There's little to worry about when appliances and other devices are working right and fumes are properly vented. But when they're not, CO levels can get high enough to cause illness and death. Hundreds of people in the U.S. die every year from CO poisoning. Alaska has one of the highest rates of death from CO poisoning.

“Carbon monoxide poisoning is a silent and senseless killer,” says Jesse Atwood, MD, pediatrician at Providence Matanuska Health Care. “Infants and children are especially susceptible to its effects.” Elderly people and people with chronic heart disease, anemia or respiratory problems are also at high risk.

At low levels, CO poisoning can mimic the flu – but without a fever. Common symptoms include headache, fatigue, shortness of breath, nausea and dizziness.

At higher levels, CO poisoning can cause severe headaches, confusion, and a loss of consciousness and death.

If you think you might have carbon monoxide poisoning, get fresh air at once. Open windows, turn off appliances or vehicles, and leave the area. Get to an emergency department and tell the medical staff you suspect CO poisoning.

Also, call the fire department, and don't re-enter the home until the fire department says it's safe.

“Having a UL-listed carbon monoxide detector in your home is a simple way to help keep your family safe,” says Dr. Atwood. “Newer models measure cumulative CO levels in the home and trigger an alarm if the gas is present at low levels for a long time or at high and potentially lethal levels for a short time.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and others, there are additional things you can do to protect yourself and your family:

- Each year have an expert check your home heating system; water heater; and any appliances that burn gas, oil or coal.
- Make sure all gas appliances are properly vented.



- Have your chimney checked or cleaned every year.
- Have a mechanic check your vehicle's exhaust system once a year.
- Never leave a vehicle running in the garage, a partially enclosed space or near dwellings.

And never try to heat your home with a device not meant for the job, such as a gas range or oven, a barbecue grill, or a portable camp stove. Some people who have trouble paying their utility bills resort to using such devices for heat. But doing so can be deadly – the devices can cause CO to build up in a home.



## Help to pay your bills

Programs are available to help qualified people with energy bills. For information on one such program – the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program – go to the website below. Your utility company may also be able to help.

[www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/liheap)