



Be alert to threat made by carbon monoxide

By RICK BOWLING
Special Writer

As winter becomes frigid and furnaces and fireplaces come back into use, the threat of carbon monoxide poisoning increases. During home inspections, we frequently see conditions that contribute to this risk yet are often easy and inexpensive to correct.

The Journal of the American Medical Association lists carbon monoxide as the leading cause of accidental poisoning deaths in America.

With the tragic death of tennis star Villa Gerulitis, homeowners have become more sensitized to the dangers of carbon monoxide (CO). CO is a dangerous gas produced by the burning of fossil fuels such as natural gas and oil. CO essentially poisons the body by robbing cells and organs of needed oxygen.

Symptoms of CO poisoning can include headaches, nausea, drowsiness and disorientation. At higher levels, total disorientation takes place and death can occur quickly. Sometimes, medical personnel confuse milder symptoms with the flu.

You should be particularly concerned if others in the household have these symptoms and the symptoms seem to get better after leaving the home. Sometimes the death of a small pet precedes more severe symptoms of humans — the canary in the coal mine effect.

The good news is that the risk of CO poisoning can be greatly reduced with two inexpensive steps: 1) have all fuel-burning equipment inspected at least annually and 2) buy an inexpensive CO detector that meets new Underwriters Laboratories (UL) standards.

Furnaces, fireplaces, water heaters and their flues or chimneys should be inspected by qualified licensed technicians. Make sure your furnace company inspects the flue; these are often the culprits in CO poisoning, as was the case with Gerulitis.

Newer furnaces have additional safety features that can shut down defective units before danger occurs. Some old

furnaces, however, actually have a flue gas vent that runs through the air supply — particularly dangerous if a defect occurs.

A big mistake that many homeowners make is to enclose their heating equipment in rooms that are too airtight. A tight utility room can spell disaster if the flue gases are drawn back down the chimney due to lack of air for combustion.

Have your furnace company calculate your combustion air needs. As we make homes more energy efficient with new windows, better insulation, etc., many older homes need to have outside air vents installed for combustion appliances.

Finally, everyone should own a carbon monoxide monitor. These can be bought for \$40 to \$80 and can be your best protection against a dangerous buildup of carbon monoxide.

You may have read about a problem in Chicago where 3,000 so-called false alarms occurred in a one-week period. This occurred when a peculiar weather pattern created a smog condition that set off alarms throughout the city.

These weren't false alarms as reported in the media; rather, the monitors did what they were designed to do: Alert the occupants to an elevated level of carbon monoxide.

In response, UL has designed a new standard that will allow for temporary conditions — such as the one found in Chicago — to occur without setting off alarms, but still sound the alarm before dangerous levels occur.

The new standard went into effect last year but some older monitors are still on the shelves. When buying a CO monitor, make sure the package states, "Meets October 1995 UL Standard."

Around the House, by Rick Bowling of the AmeriSpec home inspection service, 1378 S. Main in Plymouth, instructs homeowners about the basics of home maintenance and repair. If you have a question, write to: *Around the House/At Home*, The Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham 48009.

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