

Carbon Monoxide Alarms

(Also called carbon monoxide detectors or monitors)

Why should I be concerned about carbon monoxide (CO)?

Every year, hundreds of Americans die from CO poisoning and thousands more suffer serious illness. CO poisoning can also cause brain damage.

What is CO?

CO is a poisonous gas that is odorless and invisible. It is produced by burning any fuel including gasoline, charcoal, wood, natural gas, fuel oil or kerosene.

Should I get a CO alarm?

As of Feb. 1, 2011, the State of Wisconsin requires smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms in almost all one- and two-family dwellings, regardless of the building's age. The new CO alarm law applies to dwellings with fuel-burning appliances (such as furnaces), fireplaces or attached garages.

Owners are responsible for alarm installations and occupants have responsibility to maintain the alarms.

What kind of alarm should I buy?

MGE recommends CO alarms that operate on house current rather than battery-operated models. Plug-in alarms come with or without a cord. For new construction, alarms must be hard-wired with a battery backup.

Battery-operated models require changing the battery/sensor module every two to three years at a cost of about \$20.

What features should I look for?

- Approval by Underwriters Laboratories (required by Wisconsin law).
- Digital display to show level of CO in the air.



- Peak memory: Shows highest CO level reached, which helps track down source of CO problems.
- Length of warranty.

All CO alarms come with test/reset buttons.

Where should I place CO alarms?

- The State of Wisconsin requires that alarms must be installed in the basement and on each floor level. The alarms need not be installed in attics, garages or storage areas.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions! Alarms should be placed no closer than 6 inches from the ceiling, but it's good to place them at eye level or above so you can see them.
- Manufacturers usually say not to put CO alarms in the garage, bathroom or near the kitchen stove. Don't put alarms near open windows or doors, or ceiling fans.

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What are the symptoms of CO poisoning?

Symptoms include:

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Weakness and fatigue

These symptoms are sometimes confused with the flu.

How do I tell the difference between CO poisoning and the flu?

Suspect CO poisoning if:

- The symptoms get better with fresh air and get worse when you go back indoors.
- The sickest people spend the most time indoors.
- Everyone in the household gets sick at once.

The flu is usually passed from person to person, so not everyone gets sick at once.

What should I do if the CO alarm sounds?

- Get fresh air.
- Push the reset button.
- Call 911 if you have CO poisoning symptoms and seek medical attention. Typically this means an emergency room visit.
- If no one has CO poisoning symptoms, call MGE at 252-7111. There will probably be a fee to have a technician come to your home.

Are false alarms possible?

Some common household products such as hair spray or water vapor from a shower may trigger nuisance alarms. But always assume an alarm is real until you know the cause.

How can I prevent CO poisoning?

- Move your car out of the garage immediately after starting it. Leaving the garage door open is not sufficient.
- Have a professional check your heating system and water heater annually. Gas flames should be blue and steady. Having a CO alarm is not a substitute for safe use and maintenance of possible CO sources.
- Check for a blocked chimney or vent. If excess humidity is a problem in your home, make sure it's not due to a plugged chimney or vent. Rusty vent pipes on a furnace or water heater can be an early danger sign. Chunks of black soot near the vent pipe or an odor like formaldehyde are other warning signs.
- Never use charcoal or gas grills indoors, even in a fireplace. Likewise, don't use a charcoal grill in a garage, even if the garage door is open.
- If you put aluminum foil on the bottom of a gas oven, don't block the air intake holes around the edge.
- Don't heat your home with a gas range. Turn on the range hood or exhaust fan when using a gas range.
- Never run a lawn mower, snowblower, portable generator or any other gasoline-powered device in the garage.
- Never use camp stoves indoors or in a garage, vehicle or tent.
- Don't use "vent free" space heaters.
- Don't ignore CO alarms.

For further information:

Visit the U.S. EPA's Web site at <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/co.html>.

CO information is available in Spanish and other languages.