

WEEKLY SAFETY TIP - 2/21/11 - CO CAN BE DEADLY (TRUE STORY)

A retired couple was excited to go camping in their new truck and cab-over camper. Being as they lived in the Seattle, Washington area, they probably should not have gone camping in the winter, however they were looking forward to enjoying about their new purchase.

They got to the campsite, pulled out their charcoal grill and prepared their meal. As the evening went on, it got cold(er). And to stay warm at bedtime, they pulled their small barbeque grill inside the camper for additional heat. Luckily, this story has a happy ending. The husband woke up in time, and realized that his wife was more than just sleeping - she was unconscious. He rushed her outside for fresh air. No one died of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning. At least not this time.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 400 people die each year from accidental CO poisoning. If they are asleep, as in our story, they may not know they have been exposed. This may be attributed to its' characteristics - it is a colorless, tasteless and odorless gas. If they are awake, they may notice symptoms such as a headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and/or confusion.

This time of year, when many are affected by snowstorms, floods, power-outages, or any other reason to stay warm, the potential increases for accidental exposures to carbon monoxide. It is commonly found in fumes produced by portable generators, stoves, lanterns, and gas ranges, or by burning charcoal and wood. CO from these sources can build up in enclosed or partially enclosed spaces. People and animals in these spaces can be poisoned and can die from breathing CO.

How to be safe from CO? Ventilate, Ventilate, Ventilate - when you are in a situation where you may be exposed or working with a process that produces CO. Use a hood, a fan or any combination of methods to prevent inhalation. This gas is only slightly lighter than air, and is a major inhalation hazard. Once inhaled, it inhibits the ability of hemoglobin to deliver oxygen to your cells! Some ways to prevent CO production:

- Never leave the motor running in a vehicle parked in an enclosed or partially enclosed space, such as a garage.
- Never run a motor vehicle, generator, pressure washer, or any gasoline-powered engine outside an open window, door, or vent where exhaust can vent into an enclosed area.
- Never run a generator, pressure washer, or any gasoline-powered engine inside a basement, garage, or other enclosed structure, even if the doors or windows are open, unless the equipment is professionally installed and vented.
- Keep vents and flues free of debris, especially if winds are high. Flying debris can block ventilation lines.

And please remember that CO is also highly flammable! It has a flash point of -311. Care must be taken to prevent fires through proper storage and handling techniques.

The CDC has a new page dedicated to prevention of CO poisoning. You can view it through this link. <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/COpoisoning/>. If you have coworkers, friends or families that are not English speaking, you can view Important CO Poisoning Prevention Tips in 16 languages through this link: <http://www.cdc.gov/co/guidelines.htm>.