

Be-aware of this silent killer

By Lynn Griffiths



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Carbon monoxide Awareness is a registered charity which covers the whole of the UK. We support those poisoned by carbon monoxide, their families, carers and friends, while trying to raise awareness about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning among members of the general public. I believe those working within the medical profession, solicitors and school children should all be more aware of this silent killer.

Carbon monoxide (CO) has no taste, colour or odour but can kill in minutes; it is produced when gas, coal, wood or oil (or any other flame-producing fuel) doesn't burn correctly. This silent killer can cause permanent damage to your health, and the health of your loved ones.

Deaths from Carbon monoxide poisoning are rising, yet it is not routinely tested for at post-mortem. Our older generation, those with heart and lung problems, pregnant mothers and young children are particularly vulnerable. According to the 2001 census, there are over 97,000 children under the age of 16 looking after their loved ones at home, but they are taught nothing about this deadly, silent killer in school.

Carbon monoxide is harmful because it displaces oxygen from red blood cells, resulting in damage to major organs which are subsequently starved of that oxygen. CO has other poisonous effects on almost every major system in the body. Exposure can lead to a range of symptoms which can easily be misdiagnosed as flu, food poisoning, 'chronic fatigue' or even a simple 'virus'. We would like the medical profession to ask more questions when someone shows up with suspected flu, food poisoning or virus, because by sending someone home with the wrong diagnosis could in fact be putting patients' lives at risk. (How often are people with a 'virus' told to go home and *keep warm* – deadly advice indeed if your heater is the source of the problem.)

We would like to see doctors - and the general public – made more aware of the tell-tale signs of Carbon monoxide this winter. By doing this someone may save the life of a loved one, a friend or even the little old lady down the road.

The long term effects of Carbon monoxide poisoning are devastating on family life, and can be extremely serious. It can also cause permanent damage to major organs within the body, such as the heart, lungs and brain. It is thought that the hippocampus section of the brain that deals with new memories is particularly susceptible to long term damage. This in its self can lead to other medical problems.

The effects of Carbon monoxide poisoning over the long term may be subtle or very severe, depending on the extent of poisoning. Those poisoned can suffer problems ranging from amnesia, headaches and memory loss to personality and behavioural changes, loss of muscle and bladder control and impairment of co-ordination and vision. Although the majority of people that suffer long-term effects from carbon monoxide poisoning may recover in time, there are those that will suffer permanent organ and brain damage. Some are even left wheelchair-bound.

Many of these long term effects are not immediate and may present themselves several weeks or months after exposure. In most cases, victims like myself don't realise that Carbon monoxide is being produced, or is building up in the air we are breathing. Sometimes, the symptoms may wear off but the long term effects of low level exposure are still unknown, so it can often be difficult to be certain how this will affect your life. There also seems to be no treatment or even aftercare made available to those poisoned by Carbon monoxide, which causes victims of this silent killer more stress and frustration.

Knowledge is the key to Carbon monoxide poisoning so please think Carbon monoxide and have a safe winter this year. If you or someone you know has symptoms of CO exposure that seem worse when they are indoors, ask yourself – *could this be carbon monoxide poisoning?* Common symptoms include headache, nausea, and unusual tiredness. Unexplained 'collapse' or loss of consciousness may also be caused by exposure to CO.

If you think you have been exposed, seek medical advice. But make sure your doctor knows that the commonest blood test for CO exposure is very unreliable. A 'low' or 'normal' result does NOT mean that you have not been exposed, and does NOT guarantee that it is safe to return to the possible source of CO. To protect yourself fully, follow this advice:

- **DO** have your gas appliances checked annually by a Gas Safe registered engineer, making sure you check their I.D. card both sides to see if they are competent to work on the appliance (this information can be found on the back of his I.D. card)
- **DO** fit an audible Carbon monoxide alarm
- **DO** have your chimney checked and swept annually
- **DO** read and follow all of the instructions that accompany any fuel-burning appliance

- **DON'T** run the car in a garage even if the garage door to the outside is open. Fumes can build up very quickly in the garage and living area of your home
- **DON'T** use a gas oven/grill to heat your home, even for a short time
- **DON'T** use a charcoal grill indoors
- **DON'T ever** cover airbricks - these are there for ventilation. If the appliances in your home haven't got enough ventilation they will produce Carbon monoxide
- **DON'T** use any petrol powered engines in enclosed spaces
- **DON'T** ignore symptoms, particularly if more than one person in the home is feeling them. You could lose consciousness and die if you do nothing

There is still more to do. Please join Carbon monoxide Awareness in our campaign to raise awareness about the dangers of this silent killer. It is vital that schools, universities, colleges, councils, home builders, registered social landlords, housing associations, letting agents, councils, environmental health officers, builders, architects, manufacturers of fires, boilers and heaters, registered engineers, training bodies, fire and rescue, primary care trusts, paramedics, consultants, doctors, nurses, health visitors, therapists, gas emergency services, gas, oil, wood and coal suppliers, solicitors, local and national press, TV, radio and government ministers, policy-makers and MPs take responsibility for ensuring the public's safety against exposure to this silent killer in order to avoid serious health problems or even death.

Why is it that more people die during the winter, every year? Some, I believe, may be undiagnosed victims of Carbon monoxide.

For more information please visit: www.covictim.org