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TOWNSHIP OFFICIALS OF ILLINOIS RISK MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

# RISK REMINDER

## Carbon Monoxide – “The Silent Killer”

Each year in America, unintentional carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning claims more than 500 lives and sends another 15,200 people to hospital emergency rooms for treatment.

There are simple steps you can take to protect yourself from deadly carbon monoxide fumes.

### What is carbon monoxide?

Carbon monoxide (CO) is often called “the silent killer” because it gives no clear warning to its victims. CO is a colorless, odorless, toxic gas which interferes with the oxygen-carrying capacity of blood. CO is non-irritating and can overcome persons without warning. Many people die from CO poisoning, usually while using gasoline powered tools and generators in buildings or semi-enclosed spaces without adequate ventilation.

### What are symptoms of CO exposure?

At lower levels of exposures, CO causes mild effects that are often mistaken for the flu. These symptoms include headaches, dizziness, disorientation, nausea and fatigue. A worker who does not know about carbon monoxide poisoning may ignore these early symptoms or think a minor illness is coming on. But continuing exposure can cause confusion, loss of consciousness and even death. Unless workers know about the dangers of carbon monoxide, they may never even think about moving away from air that is poisoning them.

### What are some common sources of exposure?

- Portable generators/generators in buildings.
- Concrete cutting saws, compressors.
- Power trowels, floor buffers, space heaters.
- Welding, gasoline powered pumps.



All fuel-burning equipment emits some carbon monoxide. Poorly maintained equipment usually emits more carbon monoxide; a poorly tuned gas engine may give off up to 12 times as much carbon monoxide as a well tuned one.

### How can CO exposure be prevented?

- Never use a generator indoors or in enclosed or partially enclosed spaces such as garages, crawl spaces and basements. Opening windows and doors in an enclosed space may prevent CO buildup.
- To ensure adequate ventilation, make sure a generator has 3-4 feet of clear space on all sides.
- Do not place a generator outdoors near doors, windows or vents which could allow CO to enter and build up in occupied spaces.
- When using space heaters and stoves ensure that they are in good working order to reduce CO buildup and never use in enclosed spaces or indoors.
- Use tools powered by electricity or compressed air, if available.

Employers and workers should be made aware of the danger of carbon monoxide poisoning from fuel-burning equipment and made aware of the warning signs – headache, faintness, dizziness, confusion, nausea and irregular heartbeat – and should NEVER ignore them when working where fuel-burning equipment is being used.

**If you experience symptoms of CO poisoning, get to fresh air right away and seek immediate medical attention.**

**For more information, contact your Loss Control Consultant at (800) 252-5059, ext. 1387 or 1384.**

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