



Home guide to carbon monoxide safety



What is carbon monoxide?

Carbon monoxide gas (often abbreviated to CO) is produced by the incomplete burning of carbon-based fuels, such as natural gas, liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), oil, wood and coal. All fossil fuel burning appliances, including open fires, stoves, boilers, cookers and even barbeques have the potential to give off carbon monoxide.

Why is carbon monoxide dangerous?

Carbon monoxide gas is sometimes referred to as the "silent killer" because it is colourless, odourless, tasteless and yet extremely poisonous. When humans or animals breathe in carbon monoxide the gas prevents their blood from transporting oxygen around their bodies, which can lead to cell and tissue damage and potentially even death. The Department of Health estimates that 40 deaths and 200 hospitalisations each year in England and Wales are caused by carbon monoxide poisoning.

What are the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning?

The signs and symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are not always obvious, especially during low-level exposure, and can be mistaken for other ailments and illnesses such as food poisoning or tiredness. Symptoms may be less severe when you are further away from the source of the carbon monoxide. However, the longer you inhale carbon monoxide, the worse your symptoms will be. You may lose your balance, vision and memory, then eventually you may lose consciousness completely and even die.

Other symptoms include:

- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Breathlessness
- Nausea
- Tiredness
- Pains in the chest or stomach
- Erratic behaviour.

Long-term exposure to low levels of carbon monoxide can also lead to neurological symptoms, including difficulty thinking or concentrating, or frequent emotional changes - for example becoming easily irritated, depressed or making impulsive decisions.

How do I prevent carbon monoxide?

Because carbon monoxide is produced by the incomplete burning of carbon-based fuels, it will only usually occur if there is a fault with the cooking or heating appliance, or if there is insufficient air for combustion of the fuel. For example, it could be as a result of poor or inadequate appliance servicing, incorrect installation or lack of air vents for appliances that need them. To avoid problems it is absolutely essential that your appliance is installed correctly and

then checked and serviced at least annually by a suitably qualified heating technician. You can find details of OFTEC registered technicians online at www.oftec.org. We don't recommend that you try to undertake this work yourself.

For peace of mind it is also advisable to fit an audible carbon monoxide detector. You can purchase these from a local hardware shop or online, including from the OFTEC direct shop. Make sure it's approved to the latest British or European Standard (BS Kitemark or EN50291) and installed in the correct location as specified by the manufacturer. Carbon monoxide detectors are designed to be warning devices only and must not be considered as a substitute for scheduled periodic maintenance.

