

MAINE PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT NETWORK SYSTEM



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(Formerly Bureau of Health)
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****ADVISORY – Important Information****

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TO: All HAN Recipients
FROM: Dr. Sheila Pinette, Maine CDC Director
SUBJECT: Carbon Monoxide Poison Warning
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Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Warning

With heavy snow, high winds, and some ice forecast for today, the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (ME-CDC) is advising people to make a plan to safely use portable generators. Hospital emergency departments should be on alert for carbon monoxide poisonings due to improper placement and operation of gas-powered generators and other alternative cooking and power sources.

Four Maine residents were poisoned by carbon monoxide during the power outages that followed the Thanksgiving storm in late November. After an ice storm in December 2013, carbon monoxide poisoning was the cause of two deaths and four non-fatal poisonings in Maine. In each of these cases, the carbon monoxide came from the improper operation of generators.

In really wet weather people may be tempted to run gas-powered generators in the basement or garage, but this is extremely dangerous. One generator can produce as much carbon monoxide gas as 100 idling cars.

Generators should always be used outside and at least 15 feet from windows or doors, with the exhaust directed away from homes and buildings. Residents are urged to check the length of their extension cords and make a plan to keep generators dry to avoid the temptation of running them in an enclosed space like a garage, porch, or too close to their homes. Every home should also have a carbon monoxide detector that can run on batteries.

A study of a CO poisoning outbreak in the aftermath of the January 1998 Ice Storm found that improper placement of a gasoline generator, such as in a basement or garage, could increase the risk of CO poisoning by 20- to 300-fold.

How to Prevent CO Poisoning During Power Outages

- **Place generator outdoors** in the fresh air. Keep it at least 15 feet from windows or doors. Make sure the generator's exhaust is directed away from doors, windows, and vents. Do not put a generator in a closed or partly closed space, like a basement, cellar bulkhead, or garage. Carbon monoxide can build up to dangerous levels in these spaces.
- **Make a plan for how to keep your generator dry** and protected from ice and snow so you are not tempted to bring it inside a garage or other enclosed structure. Generators also pose a risk of shock and electrocution, especially in wet conditions. Dry your hands before touching a generator.
- **Do not use** outdoor cooking devices, such as grills or camp stoves, indoors.
- **Place a carbon monoxide detector** that is battery powered (or has battery back-up power) outside each sleeping area. CO detectors are in most stores. Look for the UL mark with the "Single Station Carbon Monoxide Alarm" statement.

If You Suspect CO Poisoning

- Leave the house at once.
- Call the fire department or 911.
- Get medical attention. Call the Poison Center (1-800-222-1222) or your doctor **after** you leave the house. Do not go back into the building until the fire department tells you it is safe.

Alert for Hospital Emergency Departments

Carbon monoxide poisoning shares many of the same symptoms of the flu, but without the fever. In a study of the outbreak of CO poisoning following the 1998 ice storm, the most common presenting

symptoms were headache (69% of cases), nausea (51%), dizziness (48%), fatigue (31%), vomiting (21%), chestpain (9%), shortness of breath (6%), and loss of consciousness (8%). These symptoms were associated with blood carboxyhemoglobin (COHb) levels ranging from 2% to 50%, with a median of 14%. Some individuals with elevated COHb levels were asymptomatic, and were identified because another household member had symptoms. Background COHb levels in nonsmokers is typically under 2% and for smokers is under 9%.

Reference: Daley R, Smith, AE, et al., An Outbreak of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning After a Major Ice Storm in Maine, *J. Emerg. Med.*, Vol. 18 (1):87-93, 2000.

Carbon monoxide poisoning was made a notifiable condition in April 2008.

All cases with clinical signs, symptoms, or known exposure consistent with diagnosis of carbon monoxide poisoning, and/or a carboxyhemoglobin level equal to or above 5% are now reportable to the ME-CDC. Carbon monoxide poisoning is a Category II notifiable condition, and thus should be reported within 48 hours. Use the same disease reporting lines as used for all notifiable conditions: 1-800-821-5821 (phone); 1-800-293-7534 (fax).

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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