

TOOLBOX TALK #11

CARBON MONOXIDE: THE SILENT KILLER

You can't smell it, taste it, or see it, but it can be deadly. Carbon monoxide – sometimes referred to as the “silent killer” – prevents oxygen from going into the body and can result in death in a short period of time, the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) states. But how does carbon monoxide form, and when are workers at risk?



Carbon monoxide (CO) is predominantly produced through incomplete combustion of carbon-containing materials, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). “In complete combustion occurs when insufficient oxygen is used in the fuel (hydrocarbon) burning process,” NIOSH states, adding that, consequently, “more carbon monoxide, in preference to carbon dioxide, is emitted.”

Carbon monoxide can come from vehicle exhaust, fuel-burning furnaces, small gasoline-powered engines, portable gasoline-powered generators, forklifts, propane-powered heaters and more. Because of this, never operate these devices in small, enclosed or unventilated places such as garages or tented off areas, or inside homes.

Signs of danger

It's important to know the warning signs of CO poisoning. MDCH recommends paying attention to flu-like symptoms, including headache, dizziness, confusion, fatigue, and feeling extremely nauseated – especially if more than one worker is experiencing these signs. To help protect workers, MDCH offers these tips:

- Find out from your employer whether your workplace is in compliance with OSHA's CO permissible exposure limit.
- Carefully follow the instructions and warning labels on all fuel-powered tools and generators.
- Stay cognizant of ventilation issues, especially when working indoors.
- If you believe a worker is experiencing CO-poisoning symptoms, move him or her outside immediately, and alert your manager.
- Never ignore CO poisoning symptoms. Get to an emergency room or call 911 if you or your coworkers feel sick. “Carbon monoxide can be determined by a quick blood test done soon after exposure,” MDCH states, adding that your chances of recovery are better if you're treated quickly.