

Health and Safety  
Executive

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# Beware of the silent killer, HSE's reminder during CO Awareness week

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) today lent its support to CO (carbon monoxide) Awareness Week, organised by campaign group CO Awareness, by reminding homeowners and landlords of the dangers of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning. Last year research commissioned by the HSE as a part of its wider gas safety review revealed that 45% of households were unaware of the dangers of CO poisoning from gas appliances, which killed 16 people in 2005/06.

Often referred to as 'the silent killer' CO fumes are particularly dangerous because they cannot be detected. You cannot see, smell or taste the fumes, which in extreme cases can kill without warning in a matter of hours.

Speaking today at the launch of CO Awareness Week in the House of Lords, Health and Safety Minister Lord McKenzie thanked the CO Awareness group for organising it, and said, "One life lost due to CO poisoning is one too many. These tragic incidents can be avoided with simple precautions. Let's make this winter a safe one. I urge the industry to continue raising awareness of the dangers of CO."

HSE advise that if you suspect your appliance is giving out excess carbon monoxide you should switch the appliance off, ventilate the room, visit your GP as a matter of urgency and ensure that a CORGI-registered installer makes the necessary repairs.

To mark HSE's support for CO Awareness Week, HSE Chief Executive Geoffrey Podger said "With the winter months upon us, and more people switching on their heating appliances, it is extremely important that we issue this alert to the public. Our advice to homeowners and landlords is be vigilant and take action now to protect yourselves and your tenants from CO Landlords are required by law to have their tenants' gas appliances and flues maintained and annual safety checks carried out. Simple precautions such as regularly servicing and maintaining gas appliances through a CORGI-registered installer and using audible carbon monoxide detectors could play a key role in saving lives."

In addition to raising awareness of the dangers of CO poisoning, HSE have sought to root out rogue gas fitters and reckless landlords who put lives at risk. Most recently in June 2007, two landlords were fined following the hospitalisation of a mother and her two children, who suffered CO poisoning after their landlords failed to ensure that gas appliances were properly maintained .

One of the main problems with detecting CO poisoning is that symptoms can mimic many common illnesses, such as flu or even simple tiredness. HSE advise that key symptoms to look out for are drowsiness, headaches, breathlessness and vomiting.

CO is produced when there isn't enough air for the complete burning of carbon fuels such as gas, oil and coal, which causes an excess of poisonous fumes. Signs that an appliance may be leaking excess carbon monoxide include:

- n Yellow or orange flames (except for fuel-effect fires which display this colour flame);
- n Soot or stains around the appliance; and
- n A pilot light that frequently blows out

More information on gas safety is available at:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/gas/domestic/index.htm>

## Notes to editors

1. Campaign group CO Awareness has organised a week of awareness raising activities to highlight carbon monoxide poisoning. CO Awareness week will be launched on Monday 15th October. Barry Sheerman MP will chair the event at which Lord McKenzie is the keynote speaker. There will be a number of other speakers, including an A&E specialist, and first hand accounts from those who have suffered from CO poisoning.
2. HSE has responsibility for regulating consumer gas safety in GB and does this largely through the Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998 (GSIUR). These regulations place responsibilities on a wide range of people, including those installing, servicing, maintaining or repairing gas appliances and other gas fittings; as well as suppliers and users of gas systems/appliances. Statutory obligations are placed on landlords to maintain gas appliances that they own.
3. The law requires that anyone who works on gas appliances must be competent, and if they are doing the work as a business, i.e. employer or self-employed, they must be CORGI registered. An installer's CORGI ID card has details of the types of appliances that an installer is trained to work on.
4. Audible CO detectors with a British or European approval mark, such as a kite mark, are strongly recommended, although not a substitute for regular checks and servicing by a CORGI-registered installer.
5. Carbon monoxide (CO) is an issue that concerns a number of Government departments. A Ministerial Group on Gas Safety and CO has been set up to co-ordinate Government efforts on CO poisoning from all carbon – based fuels. The Carbon Monoxide Consumer Awareness Alliance (COCAA) formed in February 2007 brings together organisations across all fuel types to raise awareness of CO.
6. In July 2007 HSE announced a competition to run a new gas installer registration scheme to improve gas safety standards. The overall objective of the gas installer registration scheme is to ensure safe standards of gas work that contributes to consumer gas safety. CORGI (Council of Registered Gas Installers) is currently approved by HSE to undertake this task and maintain and up-to date register of gas installers who are qualified to install or repair gas fittings and appliances. More information on the gas installer registration scheme is available at:  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/press/2007/e07029.htm>

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