



# Carbon monoxide awareness

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## What is carbon monoxide- why is it a problem?

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colourless, odourless, tasteless, poisonous gas produced by incomplete burning of carbon-based fuels, including gas, oil, wood and coal. Carbon-based fuels are safe to use. It is only when the fuel does not burn properly that excess CO is produced, which is poisonous. When CO enters the body, it prevents the blood from bringing oxygen to cells, tissues, and organs.

You can't see it, taste it or smell it but CO can kill quickly without warning. According to the [HSE statistics](#) around 20 people die from CO poisoning caused by gas appliances and flues that have not been properly installed, maintained or that are poorly ventilated. Levels that do not kill can cause serious harm to health if breathed in over a long period. In extreme cases paralysis and brain damage can be caused as a result of prolonged exposure to CO. Increasing public understanding of the risks of CO poisoning and taking sensible precautions could dramatically reduce this risk.

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## What preventative measures can I take against carbon monoxide exposure?

- n Ensure that any work carried out in relation to gas appliances in domestic or commercial premises is to be undertaken by a CORGI-registered installer, competent in that area of work.
- n HSE strongly advises that gas appliances and/or flues are installed and serviced regularly for safety by a CORGI-registered installer. If you live in tenanted accommodation, your landlord has a legal duty to carry out an annual gas safety check and maintain gas appliances. They must provide you with a copy of the completed gas safety check certificate.
- n Always make sure there is enough fresh air in the room containing your gas appliance. If you have a chimney or a flue, ensure it is not blocked up and also ensure that vents are not covered.
- n If you plan to install a gas fire in a bedroom, use a CORGI-registered installer; do not use unflued appliances like paraffin heaters and cabinet heaters.
- n Get your chimney swept from top to bottom at least once a year by a qualified sweep.
- n If you have appliances that use other fossil fuels, make sure they are serviced and maintained by a competent person. For information on competent persons' schemes,

visit the [Communities and Local Government website](#).

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### Does HSE recommend the use of carbon monoxide alarms?

HSE strongly recommends the use of audible carbon monoxide (CO) alarms as a useful back-up precaution but they must not be regarded as a substitute for proper installation and maintenance of gas appliances by a CORGI-registered installer. Before purchasing a CO alarm, always ensure it complies with British Standard EN 50291 and carries a British or European approval mark, such as a Kitemark. CO alarms should be installed, checked and serviced in line with the manufacturer's instructions.

You can be particularly at risk from CO poisoning when you are asleep, because you may not be aware of early CO symptoms until it is too late. Having an audible CO alarm could wake you and save your life.

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### What are the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning?

Early symptoms of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning can mimic many common ailments and may easily be confused with food poisoning, viral infections, flu or simple tiredness.

Symptoms to look out for include:

- n tiredness
- n drowsiness
- n headaches
- n giddiness
- n nausea
- n vomiting
- n pains in the chest
- n breathlessness
- n stomach pains
- n erratic behavior
- n visual problems.

For more information visit [NHS direct](#) or telephone 0845 4647.

If you or your family experience any of the above symptoms and you believe CO may be involved, you must seek urgent medical advice from either your GP or an accident and emergency department. You should ask for a blood or breath test to confirm the presence of CO. Be aware, CO quickly leaves the blood and tests may be inaccurate if taken more than four hours after exposure has ceased.

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### How do I know if I am at risk from carbon monoxide?

Although carbon monoxide (CO) is a colourless, odourless and tasteless gas, signs that indicate incomplete combustion is occurring, resulting in the production of CO, include:

- n Yellow or orange rather than blue flames (apart from fuel effect fires or flueless appliances which display this colour flame)
- n Soot or yellow/brown staining around or on appliances

- n Pilot lights that frequently blow out
- n Increased condensation inside windows
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### What should I do if I think my appliance is spilling carbon monoxide?

- n Switch off the appliance and do not reuse until remedial action has been taken
- n Shut off the gas supply at the meter control valve (if you know where it is). If gas continues to escape call National Grid on the Gas Emergency Freephone Number 0800 111 999
- n Open all doors and windows to ventilate the room - do not sleep in it
- n Visit your GP urgently and tell him/her that you believe your symptoms may be related to carbon monoxide poisoning and request either a blood and/or breath sample
- n Contact a [CORGI](#)-registered installer to make repairs
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### Further advice and information

- n HSE Gas Safety Advice Line 0800 300 363 (Freephone service)
- n Campaign for Bedsit Rights 02075052135
- n Carbon Monoxide Support Group (South West) 01278786488
- n [CO-Awareness](#) 0771 589 9296  
E-mail: [LynnCoAwareness@aol.com](mailto:LynnCoAwareness@aol.com)
- n [CO-Gas Safety](#) 01372 466112  
E-mail: [office@co-gassafety.co.uk](mailto:office@co-gassafety.co.uk)
- n National Grid Gas Emergency Line (24 hours) 0800 111 999 (Freephone Service)
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