

Written by

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Wintertime weather can bring about more than just snow emergencies in Minnesota. Accidental carbon monoxide (CO) poisonings also peak during winter months, according to a new report on CO exposures released by the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).

The report, entitled Minnesota Environmental Public Health Tracking: Carbon Monoxide Data and Measures 2000-2007, presents trends in unintentional CO exposures and poisonings throughout the state. Its findings include the numbers and rates of Minnesotans who are sickened by exposure to this odorless, tasteless, and colorless gas. The report was prepared by the Minnesota Environmental Public Health Tracking program (MN EPHT), which tracks environmental hazards and health in Minnesota. MN EPHT is now part of a larger network of CDC-funded states collecting data on CO poisonings, making this the nation's first consistent approach to tracking CO poisonings.

The report notes that while CO poisonings occur year-round, they occur most often during fall and winter. These colder months are when faulty furnaces and improperly maintained or operated fuel-burning devices such as non-electric space heaters and power generators are likely to be used. Hospitalizations, visits to the emergency department (ED), and deaths due to unintentional, non-fire related CO poisonings are also more common among outstate residents compared with metro region residents.

In just a five-year period (2003-2007), unintentional CO poisonings were responsible for 61 deaths, 175 hospitalizations, and 1,261 ER visits among Minnesotans. These numbers, which refer only to incidents that are not fire-related, are even higher when incidents involving accidental fires (such as residential fires) are included. The statistics paint a grim picture, especially since most of these unintentional CO poisonings are completely preventable.

Fortunately, legislation is in place in hopes of curbing the numbers of unintentional CO poisonings in Minnesota. A new Minnesota state law requiring CO alarms in all single-family homes and multifamily apartments became fully effective on August 1, 2009. In conjunction with this legislation, MDH is collecting telephone survey data on how many homes have CO alarms. This survey data, along with future CO reports, may be helpful in measuring the effectiveness of the new CO alarm legislation.

To prevent CO poisoning, MDH recommends the following:

- Install and maintain a CO alarm within 10 feet of each room used for sleeping – it's Minnesota state law: www.dps.state.mn.us/fmarshal/CO/CO.htm.
- Have a qualified technician check your heating systems and fuel burning appliances annually.
- Educate yourself and family members about the signs and symptoms of CO poisoning, such as severe headache, dizziness, nausea, and drowsiness: www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/indoorair/co/index.html
- Never leave a car or truck running inside a garage attached to your house, even if you keep the garage door open. Instead, start your vehicle and back it out of the garage to let it warm up outside during cold weather.
- Never use a generator or fuel-powered tools inside the home, garage, in enclosed areas, or

'Tis (still) the Season for carbon monoxide risks: New report shows CO poisonings occur most often during

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near windows, doors, vents, and other openings.

The new carbon monoxide report is available at www.health.state.mn.us/tracking/ . For more information about CO poisonings, or if you have a poison emergency, call the 24-hour Minnesota Poison Control System at 1-800-222-2222.