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Carbon Monoxide: A Winter Months' Health Threat

Residents urged to get heating appliances inspected, install detectors

SACRAMENTO - The California Air Resources Board issued a carbon monoxide health warning today, recommending annual inspections for combustion appliances such as ovens and propane heaters, and installation of life-saving CO detectors.

On average each year, 35 Californians and 450 people nationally die from accidental CO poisoning, and many more experience flu-like symptoms. Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas that blocks the use of oxygen in the body. Young children and individuals with heart disease are those most likely to be affected by CO poisoning.

"Carbon monoxide is truly a silent killer," said ARB Chairman Mary Nichols. "As winter weather beckons us to warm our homes, there is little thought that heating appliances can be potentially hazardous. Simple steps can be taken to protect yourself and your family from tragedy. □"

More than half of CO poisoning deaths are from malfunctioning or improperly vented combustion appliances. ARB recommends:

- Proper use and maintenance of any appliances that produce a flame such as gas furnaces and gas and propane space heaters can prevent exposure to lethal levels of CO
- Gas ovens should not be used for heating the home;

- Kerosene or propane space heaters, charcoal grills and barbecues and unvented gas logs are dangerous and cannot be used legally indoors in California;
- Annual check-ups of all gas appliances by a qualified professional;
- Use of Underwriters Laboratory (UL) approved CO detectors that sound an alarm when dangerous carbon monoxide levels are found; some also have warning signals or digital readouts to indicate lower levels of CO;
- Using caution when heating with propane appliances, older wall or floor gas furnaces and fireplaces;
- Placing emergency generators outdoors away from windows and doors to prevent fumes from entering the home; and,
- Proper use and maintenance of appliances in recreational vehicles.

If you are concerned about the safety of your gas furnace or oven, contact your local utility provider or utility certified heating contractor immediately and request a combustion appliance safety test that includes CO measurements. Some utility companies will inspect home equipment for little or no charge.

In addition, do not to operate cars or other internal combustion engines in enclosed spaces or attached garages. A third of CO poisoning deaths are the result of accidental exposure from vehicles running in closed garages.

ARB data show that outdoor CO levels rise throughout California between the months of November and March because of stagnant weather conditions. These levels have been measured in covered garages and at busy intersections. Rising levels of outdoor CO may generate health complaints in sensitive people.

For more information on indoor combustion pollutants, see our indoor air quality guideline entitled "Combustion Pollutants in Your Home" at; <http://www.arb.ca.gov/research/indoor/combustf.htm>.

The Air Resources Board is a department of the California Environmental Protection Agency. ARB's mission is to promote and protect public health, welfare, and ecological resources through effective reduction of air pollutants while recognizing and considering effects on the economy. The ARB oversees all air pollution control efforts in California to attain and maintain health based air quality standards.

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