Carbon Monoxide Poisoning & The Year I Almost Killed My Family



Where I live, the temperatures are dropping. The daytime highs are in the single digits (Celsius), and the nights are even cooler. It's not the kind of cool that's good for sleeping. It's the kind of cool that means you need to "heat it up." It's the dreaded heating season – a season I associate with the time I almost killed my entire family.

My Almost Fatal Mistake

It was 10 years ago. My family had grown quickly and we needed more space. We had designed, and I was in the process of building, an addition to our house to accommodate our needs. The addition was at the back and – at this stage of construction – was independent of the main house.

Every night after the kids were tucked into bed, I went out to work on the addition. It was early fall and, on this particular night, it was unseasonably cold. My wife asked me to turn on the furnace even though everyone in the family knows that I stubbornly don't turn the furnace on until Halloween. But she was right – the house really needed warming up.

I hadn't done my seasonal checks for the heating season because I was too busy building. For a moment, I considered

not working on the addition and conducting the checks. But instead, I decided to turn on the furnace and not lose a night’s work. That choice might have cost me my family.

I switched the thermostat from cooling to heating and set the temperature. By the time I was dressed and ready to go outside to work, I heard the furnace come on. The house would soon be warm. My wife had gone upstairs to watch TV in bed. All my family was now on the second floor.

I worked for quite some time before I realized a tool I needed was in my workroom in the basement. So, I went into the house where I heard a high-pitched squeal. The house was incredibly warm. I covered my ears and sought out the source of the squealing. It was the carbon monoxide detector. How long it had been squealing for is something I am not certain of. All I could think about was my family. I raced upstairs to find the second floor in complete silence. All were sound asleep. I awoke everyone and we proceeded to evacuate, opening the doors and windows on the way out. We were safe.

What Went Wrong?

Why was it so hot in the house? It turns out that the thermostat had failed to recognize the temperature’s “off” limit and continued to run. The furnace had run continuously from the moment it had started that evening. In an R2000 home, the house would have been even warmer – but my house is 150 years old and not exactly energy-efficient.

Carbon monoxide (CO), a colourless, odourless, and tasteless gas, is a byproduct of combustion. The more inefficient the combustion, the higher the amount of CO produced. And my old furnace certainly fit the bill for high CO creation.

Another culprit in this incident was the raccoons. Because I hadn’t conducted my inspection, I didn’t know that during the summer, a family of raccoons had moved into my chimney and

built themselves a lovely home. This home had blocked the gases from exhausting up the chimney, forcing the gases back into the house.

The final contributing factor was that there was only one CO detector – on the main floor. The detector had done its job and detected and alarmed. However, all the doors were closed downstairs and the bedroom doors were also closed. Nobody could hear the alarm.

Had I taken the time to conduct my inspection, I probably would have discovered these problems.

How to Prevent CO Poisoning in Your Home

Carbon monoxide can fill a house very rapidly, and when someone inhales a high enough concentration of carbon monoxide, they can die. One of the most important things you can do to prevent CO poisoning in your home is to install a carbon monoxide detector. Here are a few quick pointers:

- Read the manufacturers' instructions first.
- Install CO detectors outside sleeping areas, but not in the bedrooms themselves.
- Install a CO detector near any gas-burning appliance.
- CO detectors work more effectively if installed on the wall or the ceiling.
- Ensure your family members know what to do if they hear the alarm. Remember, once a person's blood has CO in it, it takes hours to purge, even in a clear atmosphere.

Hazard recognition checklists are also very effective if you take the time to follow them. They help identify potential hazards and recommend preventive action to eliminate or control the risks.

Moral of the Story

We often hear about people dying from CO poisoning. But with the proper detectors and a good inspection checklist, you can prevent your family members from becoming victims. If you ever question whether or not you should take the time to conduct the inspection, consider what you've got to lose if you don't. Your family's safety is worth the time, every time.