

Carbon Monoxide Safety in Power Outages

Mainers should be extremely careful when using a gas-powered generator or similar alternative heating or power sources. Improper operation or placement of such devices can lead to Carbon Monoxide (CO) poisoning.

Avoid Carbon Monoxide Poisoning During Power Outages

A Message from the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC)

Warning signs of CO poisoning are flu-like symptoms without fever (such as headache, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, drowsiness, and confusion). CO poisoning can also result in coma and death. CO is an odorless gas emitted when burning most fuels. Improper operation or placement of alternative heating or power sources can result in poisoning when CO gas builds-up in enclosed spaces.

A State study of the CO poisoning epidemic, in the aftermath of the January 1998 ice storm power outages, found that improper placement of a gasoline generator, such as in a basement or garage, could increase the risk of poisoning up to 300-fold. When the power went out for several days after Tropical Storm Irene in August of 2011, carbon monoxide poisoning was the cause of two deaths and four non-fatal poisonings in Maine. In each case, the carbon monoxide came from improper use of generators.

Using a kerosene heater in a room without any doors to other rooms opened, or failing to crack a window, also put people at increased risk for CO poisoning.

To Avoid CO Poisoning During Power Outages:

- Place generators outdoors in the fresh air
- Make a plan for how to keep your generator dry and protected from ice and snow so you are not tempted to bring it inside a garage or other enclosed structure. Generators also pose a risk of shock and electrocution, especially in wet conditions. Dry your hands before touching a generator.
- Ensure the generator is at least 15 feet away from home windows or doors
- Ensure the generator is not placed in an enclosed or semi-enclosed space (such as basement, cellar bulkhead, attached garage) where carbon monoxide can build up to dangerous levels.
- Use kerosene heaters in a well ventilated room, by either keeping doors to other rooms open or keeping a window partially open (at least 1 inch)
- Use only K-1 grade fuel in kerosene heaters. Follow instructions for setting the wick height.
- Do not use outdoor cooking devices indoors (such as gas or charcoal grills, gas camp stoves).

- Do not use indoor gas cooking stoves for heat.
- Keep chimney flue and a window open when burning decorative gas fireplace logs as a heat source.
- Place a carbon monoxide detector that is battery powered (or has battery back-up power) outside each sleeping area. CO detectors are in most stores. Look for the UL mark with the "Single Station Carbon Monoxide Alarm" statement.

If You Suspect CO Poisoning

If you or anyone in the home suspect you are being poisoned by carbon monoxide:

- Leave the house immediately, and then call your local fire department or 911.
- Seek medical attention by contacting either the Northern New England Poison Center (800-222-1222) or your physician after you have left the area where you suspect the carbon monoxide is present.
- Do not go back into the building until you know the CO levels are safe.

The following publications are from the MaineCDC:

- [Carbon Monoxide Safety Fact Sheet](#)
- [Generator Safety Door Hanger](#)
- [Generator Safety Flyer](#)

(These publications are in Adobe .pdf format)