

Symptoms of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Purpose

This document has been prepared as general background information about carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide for diagnosing and treating the condition.

Background information

Deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning (CO) have occurred in WA, NSW, NZ and Victoria in recent times, and failure to diagnose prior symptoms has been common in each case.

In Victoria alone, 6 people have died in recent years from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning caused by defective gas appliances and flues.

The Office of Gas Safety is therefore urging all medical practitioners to be familiar with the symptoms of CO poisoning.

Why is carbon monoxide dangerous?

You cannot see, taste or smell CO, but it can kill without warning

Carbon monoxide poisons by entering the lungs via the normal breathing mechanism and displacing oxygen from the bloodstream. Interruption of the normal supply of oxygen puts at risk the functions of the heart, brain and other vital functions of the body.

Symptoms

The symptoms of carbon monoxide can mimic many common ailments and may easily be confused with flu or viral infections.

Early CO poisoning symptoms include tiredness, shortness of breath, mild headaches and nausea.

When CO poisoning gets worse, people may experience;

- severe headaches;
- dizziness;
- weakness and sleepiness;
- nausea and vomiting.

If the poisoning is extreme, it may lead to confusion, loss of consciousness and death. Loss of consciousness can happen quickly.

Some people are especially sensitive to CO. This includes people with;

- heart disease;
- anaemia;
- young children;
- unborn babies; and
- the elderly

Warning signs for carbon monoxide poisoning

If symptoms occur when the patient is using, or immediately after using, a gas appliance, they may be attributable to CO poisoning.

Another telltale sign is if the symptoms go away when the patient is not at home, or on holidays.

A pattern of symptoms in more than one person is a very strong indicator of CO poisoning.

If CO poisoning is suspected, the doctor can take a blood or breath sample. However, carbon monoxide leaves the blood very quickly and the tests may be inaccurate if taken more than 4 hours after exposure has ended.

Treatment

People suffering from CO poisoning can be given pure oxygen to breathe, to speed the secretion of carbon monoxide from the blood.

A specialised form of treatment called Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy can be used to significantly improve the chances of survival and reduce the risk of further damage to the body.

Where can GPs find more information?

For further information on CO poisoning, including a very good video entitled '*Medical practitioners guidance on diagnosis and treatment of CO in patients*' visit the UK Web-site

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/gas/domestic/information.htm>

www.coheadquarters.com

www.carbonmonoxidekills.com

www.coheadquarters.com

Contact the Office of Gas Safety on 1800 652 563, www.ogs.vic.gov.au or email inquiries@ogs.vic.gov.au

Case study:

A young woman presents to her GP with complaints of dizziness, nausea and headaches, which she says have been occurring over the last three months.

After conducting a series of tests and taking a family history of case studies, the GP concludes the patient is suffering from migraines.

The patient is later found dead in her bathroom.

An autopsy reveals she has died from carbon monoxide poisoning and a subsequent investigation of the bathroom finds the flue of the instantaneous gas hot water heater in the bathroom is blocked by a bird's nest.

The Office of Gas Safety is urging residents who have this type of instantaneous gas water heater in their toilet or bathroom to REPLACE it immediately, even if it is new.

Having this type of heater in a small, enclosed room such as a bathroom or toilet can cause deadly carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning as happened in this case.