NJ Health
New Jersey Department of Health

After a flood, what the public should know about...

Carbon Monoxide

What is Carbon monoxide and where does it come from?
Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colorless, odorless and tasteless gas. In your home CO is formed when fuels such as natural gas, propane, heating oil, kerosene, coal or wood are not completely burned. Gas stoves, hot water heaters, furnaces, fireplaces, space heaters and wood-burning stoves can all be sources of CO if they are not used or maintained properly. Powered electric generators used during power outages are also a major source of indoor CO. It is important that CO levels remain low; otherwise, it may become a health and safety concern.

Why is carbon monoxide a health concern?
Carbon monoxide is a health concern because at elevated levels it is poisonous. When carbon monoxide is inhaled it is immediately absorbed into your blood stream. Once there, it forms a substance (carboxyhemoglobin) which has the ability to block oxygen from being absorbed and used by your body. As you continue to inhale CO, more and more of this substance is formed in your blood and eventually your body becomes more starved of oxygen.

What are warning signs of carbon monoxide poisioning?
Exposure to CO can cause loss of consciousness and death. The most common symptoms of CO poisoning are headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion. People who are sleeping or who have been drinking alcohol can die from CO poisoning before ever having symptoms. Infants, the elderly, and people with anemia or heart or respiratory disease are more sensitive to CO exposures.

What can you do to prevent carbon monoxide poisioning?

- Buy CO detectors which meet Underwriters Laboratory Standard, UL 2034, and install them at the proper location(s) within your home.
- Never run a generator, pressure washer, or any gasoline-powered engine inside a basement, garage, or other enclosed structure, even if the doors or windows are open.
- Never run your car, generator, pressure washer, or any gasoline-powered engine outside an open window, door, or vent where exhaust can vent into your home.
- Never leave a vehicle running inside an attached or detached garage, regardless if ventilation is provided or if the garage door is open.
- Never use a charcoal grill, hibachi, lantern, or portable camping stove inside your home.
- Do not use ovens, ranges or other natural gas appliances as a substitute for heating your home.
- Have chimneys and exhaust flues professionally inspected and serviced.
- Have a qualified contractor service all gas and heat appliances and perform routine maintenance at intervals specified by the manufacturer.
- Do not attempt to service your gas and heating appliances without proper knowledge, training and tools.
- If CO poisoning is suspected, consult a health care professional immediately.

For more information

- Your local health department http://nj.gov/liealth/lh/directory/lhdselectcounty.shtml
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) http://emergencv.cdc.gov/disasters/
- New Jersey Dept. of Health, Environmental & Occupational Health Assessment Program www.ni.uov/health/iep/index.shtml
- New Jersey Office of Emergency Management http://www.readv.nj.gov