

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning at Work



Most of us are familiar with the potentially lethal danger of carbon monoxide poisoning in the home whilst we are asleep yet any enclosed space which contains equipment and appliances which burn fuels are just as susceptible so that includes workplaces and enclosed sites.

WHAT CAUSES CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING?

Carbon Monoxide (CO) is produced as a direct result of an incomplete combustion of fuel so, there are many devices which, have the potential to cause carbon monoxide poisoning in the workplace (especially if damaged or poorly maintained). These can include, but are not limited to:

- Furnaces and water heaters
- Room heaters and central heating system
- Cooking and canteen appliances
- Portable generators
- Vehicle engines run in enclosed and poorly ventilated spaces and faulty exhaust systems
- Blocked or damaged chimneys

In fact, any appliance which is gas, petrol or wood fueled has the potential to be a killer if it's not properly maintained and/or operated in a well ventilated area.

MINIMIZING THE RISKS AT WORK

Poorly maintained, ageing and defective appliances alongside inadequate ventilation are the primary causes of carbon monoxide poisoning in the workplace. A thorough risk assessment is therefore crucial on all relevant equipment and appliances. A risk assessment will address various aspects of the machinery's location, standard and operator usage including:

- Adequate ventilation
- Regular checks/servicing
- The presence of (regularly tested) carbon monoxide monitors
- The manner in which the machinery is operated

DETECTING CARBON MONOXIDE IN THE WORKPLACE

Carbon monoxide poisoning has often been referred to as the 'silent, deadly killer' as you can't see, hear or even smell it. This is why people have fallen prey to its devastating effect as they've been asleep in bed at home. So, whilst the workplace environment might not seem to be the kind of place where you might think you would be at risk, think again, especially if you are

RECOGNIZING THE EARLY SYMPTOMS OF CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING AT WORK

In the early stages, if carbon monoxide is present, you might start to experience non-specific symptoms which can vary from person to person. In general, these can be similar to those you might experience if you had flu but without incurring a high temperature. Therefore, you might experience nausea, dizziness, headache, abdominal pain or stomach upset or a sore throat and/or persistent cough. One of the surest signs that carbon monoxide is present in the workplace is if these symptoms start to diminish when you leave work and return home only to re-emerge when you're next in work. This is possibly more noticeable after you've returned from, say, a week or two's holiday. More evidence would be where several of your colleagues are also experiencing similar symptoms.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU SUSPECT CARBON MONOXIDE AT WORK?

If you and/or your colleagues are experiencing anything akin to the symptoms that are outlined above, you should immediately inform your health and safety manager at work who is obliged to carry out a thorough investigation. Your employer must act upon any evidence that's provided to them and must take all possible steps to eliminate or, at least, greatly reduce the possibility of exposure to carbon monoxide. Failure to do so and they are breaking the law and - as it can be proven through blood tests whether or not you have more than the acceptable levels of carbon monoxide in your blood - you can also sue your employer if they have been negligent.