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Healthy Holidays: Start the New Year by Spending a Few Dollars to Save Your Life!

Yes, spending a few dollars could save your life! How is that possible? Let me share a story with you. A few years ago, there was a gas odor in my house. I lived in a duplex and the only gas appliances on my side were a furnace and water heater. I did not hear a leak or smell a stronger odor in the furnace room. I went over to the other apartment and the odor was much stronger.

The gas company was called, and Mr. Hank, thoroughly checked all the appliances and tested for carbon monoxide. Carbon monoxide was found in the furnace room. It was determined that the water heater and furnace were not venting properly.

After being checked by a local heating and air conditioning contractor the furnace and vent were determined to be the problem. The amount of carbon monoxide was not at dangerous levels...yet. It would have only been a matter of time.

There are some important factors to consider and be aware of with carbon monoxide:

1. Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless, deadly gas. Because you can't see, taste, or smell it, carbon monoxide can kill you before you know it's there!

2. Carbon monoxide is attracted to hemoglobin in the bloodstream. When breathed in, carbon monoxide replaces the oxygen which cells need to function. Carbon monoxide rapidly accumulates in the blood causing flu-like symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, nausea, dizzy spells, confusion, and irritability. At increased levels, vomiting, loss of consciousness and eventually brain damage and death may result.

3. Carbon monoxide is a by-product of combustion when fuel is burned. It is produced by common home appliances, such as gas or oil furnaces, gas appliances, gas water heaters or space heaters, fireplaces, charcoal grills, and wood burning stoves or fireplaces. Fumes from automobiles and gas-powered lawn mowers also contain carbon monoxide and can enter a home through walls or doorways if an engine is left running in an attached garage.

4. If a home is vented properly and is free from appliance malfunctions or air pressure fluctuations and blockages, carbon monoxide will most likely be safely vented to the outside. Frequently today's energy efficient homes are tightly sealed and can trap carbon monoxide in a home year-round. Furnace exchangers can crack, and vents can become blocked. Sometimes fireplaces can backdraft which can force contaminated air back into the home. Exhaust fans on range hoods, clothes dryers and bathroom fans can pull combustion products into the home which would normally be exhausted through vents attached to the appliances.

5. The Consumer Product Safety Commission recommends installing at least one carbon monoxide detector per household, near the sleeping area. Additional detectors on every level of the home provide extra protection.

Back to the story, the heat exchanger on the furnace was cracked, the exhaust vent partially blocked, and the gas water heater was back drafting when the furnace and water heater ran at the same time. Because the levels of carbon monoxide were very low, within the acceptable range, there were no long-term health effects.

So why did I smell gas? Well, the gas range was bumped in the night and a slow leak ensued. Normally I would not have come back to the house in the morning after the local morning radio show. That day I did, and it saved my life and the other resident's. Gas leaks are deadly too but that is another article for another day.

Since this has happened, new carbon monoxide detectors were installed. The furnace was replaced, and the water heater was repaired to prevent back drafts. This time of year, with the cold weather becoming more frequent, our furnaces run more, and our homes are closed to the outside fresh air. Carbon monoxide poisoning may occur at any time of the year though not just in the winter months.

Please spend a few dollars and purchase a new carbon monoxide detector. If you have an older detector, please replace it. Older carbon monoxide detectors become less effective over time. Replace older detectors with more accurate updated models every five years and change batteries twice a year just like recommended for smoke detectors.

So, you see, spending a few dollars could save your life.

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