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Protecting yourself from carbon monoxide at home

By Michael J. Solender

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The recent investigation into carbon monoxide poisoning deaths of three people in two different incidents at a motel in Boone has brought the issue of CO poisoning back to the forefront.

Carbon monoxide is a lethal poison and the No. 1 cause of poisoning deaths in the United States. Some 400 to 500 deaths due to carbon monoxide poisoning are reported annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control. North Carolina reported the 11th largest number of fatalities out of 50 states during a recent eight-year reporting period.

The Boone deaths, caused by CO gas seeping into a motel room from a swimming pool water heater, holds a lesson for homeowners as well: Every home should have a carbon monoxide detector on every level.

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless and tasteless gas. Sources include natural gas and propane, both commonly used in home heating and cooking systems.

Other sources include gasoline, coal and virtually anything that burns. Small engines, automobiles, kerosene-powered heaters or generators all are sources of producing carbon monoxide and should be operated in well-ventilated areas.

What are the symptoms?

CO poisoning can be lethal. According to the Mayo Clinic, symptoms include dull headache, weakness, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, confusion, blurred vision and loss of consciousness. Individuals with symptoms should be exposed to continuous fresh air and immediately evaluated by medical personnel. Call 911.

In the fall of 2010, Raleigh resident Sarah Fernside

- More tips for homeowners

- Homeowners should have annual checks of every fuel-combusting unit in the home independent of CO readings as a preventive measure.

- Mecklenburg and Wake County Health Regulations require CO alarms in all new dwellings, and require existing homeowners and landlords to install alarms.

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Tanner, 64, was found dead inside her home from carbon monoxide fumes. Her husband was hospitalized. Police determined that the couple's car was accidentally left running in a closed garage and the fumes had seeped into the home.

Sierra Mckoy, public education coordinator with the Durham Fire Department, said this situation can be more common than people realize.

"People may want to warm up their car on a cold day, or just sit in the comfort of their car while on a call and leave the motor running," said Mckoy. "This is an extreme hazard, even with the garage door open. To be completely safe people must back their car completely out of their garage if they wish to leave the motor running."

Install more than one alarm

Tim O'Brien, service manager with Morris-Jenkins heating and air conditioning specialists in Charlotte, said it's important to place carbon monoxide detectors in several rooms and every level of the house. "There is no real way for a non-trained consumer to detect these issues," he said.

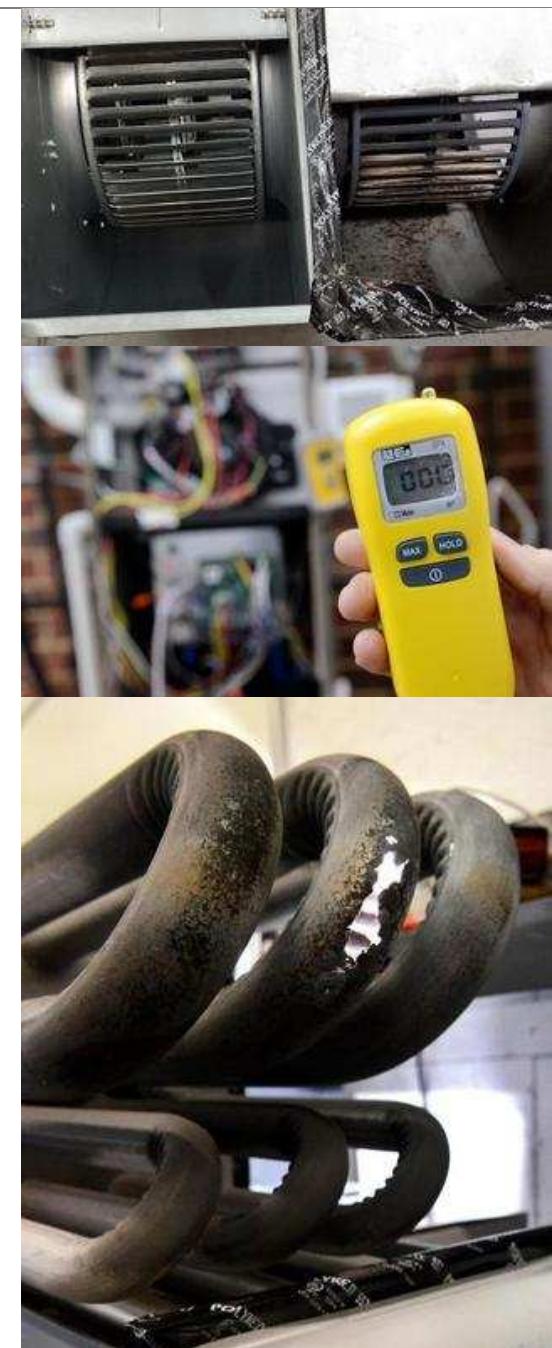
"Our technicians carry hand-held carbon monoxide detectors on all service calls," O'Brien said. "They are trained to do thorough inspections when they find elevated levels of CO in a residence. One thing we caution home owners about is the sources for elevated carbon monoxide can be varied and not easily detected by the untrained eye."

The detectors are sold in hardware and home-improvement stores and can be battery operated, plugged in or hardwired into your home, or used in combination. Experts say this is the best option because it provides backup if the power goes out or batteries fail. Basic home models start below \$30.

Most manufacturers recommend replacing the batteries annually and testing units at least monthly.

If your carbon monoxide alarm goes off, leave your home immediately and call the fire department.

Portable detectors are also available for those who want the added security when they travel. A First Alert Travel Detector with travel case is available at Amazon for \$26.



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