PEDIATRIC UNIT

Winter Fire and Carbon Monoxide Safety

Joseph Lesnik, MD, FAAP
Pediatric Hospitalist
Hendricks Regional Health

According to the United State Fire Administration, a home fire is the most dangerous fire threat to a family. Approximately 16,000 people are injured or die in home fires every year. This risk increases during the winter months when people are spending more time indoors and using heating devices. We all have a role to play in ensuring that fires don't start. The good news is that your role is simple and intuitive. By following some simple safety tips, you can significantly reduce the likelihood of yourself or your loved ones experiencing the tragedy of a home fire.

Home Fires

Cooking is the leading cause of household fires

- When cooking, avoid wearing loose clothing that can easily catch on fire.
- Keep anything that can catch fire, such as towels, away from cooking surfaces.
- Turn pot handles away from you to reduce the chances of scalding.
- Maintain a three-foot "kid-free-zone" around cooking areas.

Space heater safety

- Place the heater on a hard, level, and nonflammable surface. These appliances are intended to sit on the floor, not on a table.
- Establish a three-foot "kid-and-pet-free-zone" around the heater, and never put a space heater in a child's room.
- Keep the space heater at least 3 feet away from combustible materials, such as furniture, bedding, and curtains. A taller heater may need to be even further away.
- Don't use a heater in a workshop or garage near paint, gas cans, or matches.
- Turn it off when you leave the room or go to bed.
- Unplug the heater when it's not in use by pulling the plug straight from the outlet. Check the cord for damage periodically, and don't use the heater if the cord is frayed or worn.
- Don't plug another electrical device or an extension cord into the same outlet as a heater – that can cause overheating.

Smoke alarms can make the difference between life and death

- Install smoke alarms inside and outside sleeping areas and on all levels of your home.
- Change the batteries every year and test your smoke alarms monthly.
- Replace smoke alarms that are more than 10 years old.

Every second counts

- Practice your home fire drill at least once a year.
- Know two exits from every room.
- Have a designated meeting location outside your home.

Carbon Monoxide

As the winter weather continues, in addition to the added fire risk with space heaters, the potential for carbon monoxide exposure increases this time of year. Carbon monoxide, also called CO, is a gas that you cannot see, taste, or smell. It is often called “the invisible killer.” It is created when fossil fuels such as kerosene, gasoline, coal, natural gas, propane, methane, or wood do not burn completely. In addition to generators and alternate heating sources causing potential CO exposure, poisoning can result from malfunctioning or improperly vented furnaces, water heaters, clothes dryers or cars left running in the garage. According to the United States Fire Administration, the danger of CO exposure depends on several variables including a person’s health and activity level. Infants, pregnant women, and people with physical conditions that limit the body's ability to use oxygen (i.e., asthma, heart disease) can be more severely affected by lower concentrations of CO than healthy adults would. A person can be poisoned by a small amount of CO over an extended period or by a large amount of CO over a short amount of time. Knowing about the danger of CO and its symptoms can help save a life. Symptoms of CO poisoning include headache, nausea, and drowsiness. Symptoms of low-level CO poisoning can be confused with food poisoning or the flu. Even moderate levels of CO exposure can cause death if headaches, dizziness, and nausea are ignored until the person is unable to respond. If you suspect that you have been exposed to CO, seek immediate medical attention. The best way to protect your family from CO exposure is to have CO alarm(s) in your residence. If the CO alarm ever activates, quickly evacuate and call 911 once safely outside. Upon arrival, fire department personnel will measure the CO levels in your home as well as evaluate the people who may have been exposed to unhealthy levels of CO. The expected life span of a CO alarm varies between five to seven years, depending on the brand. Replace the alarm according to the manufacturer’s instructions or when the end-of-life signal sounds.

Frequently Asked Carbon Monoxide Alarm Questions

- **What type of Carbon Monoxide (CO) alarm should I get?**
  The functions of the alarm vary based on price, brand, and personal preference. It is important to choose a CO alarm that is listed by a qualified testing laboratory. Some CO alarms contain small LED screens that indicate the parts per million of CO in the air. These help determine the current levels of CO exposure. A CO alarm is not a substitute for a smoke alarm and vice versa. Know the difference between the sounds of each alarm.
- **Where should I install the CO alarm?**
- The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recommends the placement of a CO alarm outside each separate sleeping area and on every level of the home. Follow the manufacturer’s guidelines when installing whichever unit you select. Some alarms are installed at ceiling level while others are plugged into outlets just a few feet from the floor. Since CO particles distribute themselves evenly throughout the room, either placement is allowed.

For additional information about CO alarms, smoke alarms, evacuation planning, or general fire safety, contact your local fire department. You may also check the websites of the United State Fire Administration (usfa.fema.gov) and the National Fire Protection Association (nfpa.org).

*Should a situation arise in which your child needs to be admitted to a hospital, remember that Hendricks Regional Health’s dedicated pediatric unit is staffed 24/7 to care for children from birth to 18 years. Learn more at **hendricks.org/pediatrics**.*