

## Understanding Pollution: Why is Carbon Monoxide Nicknamed the Silent Killer?

Carbon monoxide is often mentioned as one of the more dangerous pollutants in our world today. It is an odorless, tasteless, and colorless gas that is nicknamed the Silent Killer.<sup>i</sup> Alright, I am both intrigued by that name, and also just a little intimidated. So, as I do often when I find something of interest that I don't know much about I went straight to my computer and booted it up. A bit of research was necessary to find out what all the buzz was about, and why so many people are concerned about carbon monoxide. What I found definitely backed up the nickname that Carbon Monoxide has received.



Carbon monoxide kills an average of 430 people a year annually in the United States, and males are three times more likely to die from carbon monoxide poisoning than females.<sup>ii</sup> The way carbon monoxide works is that it enters the blood stream in place of oxygen, and thus deprives all of your vital organs including your brain and heart of oxygen.<sup>iii</sup> Early signs of carbon monoxide poisoning include headaches, fatigue, nausea, difficulty breathing, and dizziness; more severe symptoms are vomiting, mental confusion, loss of muscle control, and finally loss of consciousness.<sup>iv</sup> If caught early enough CO poisoning is treatable, but even then there is the possibility of long term heart and brain damage as they are both organs that greatly require oxygen, and are easily damaged if deprived.<sup>v</sup> If a great deal of Carbon monoxide is inhaled a high enough dose of can kill you.<sup>vi</sup>

Think about that. Think about how it must feel to lose control of the muscles of your body or to be confused inside your own head. Not something I want to experience.

Now, those are some of the dangers of carbon monoxide, but who is at risk from carbon monoxide poisoning? Well. CO is created when carbon based fuel sources are not fully burned.<sup>vii</sup> Since most fossil fuels such as oil and natural gas are carbon based that makes carbon monoxide quite common. There are certain occupation where you are more at risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. These include firefighters (around all that smoke), taxi drivers (cars are a major source of carbon), toll booth or tunnel attendants, welders, mechanics, anyone who works with diesel, forklift operators, and anyone who is around a furnace, boiler, brewery, or those in manufacturing.<sup>viii</sup> *Whew!* The worst part is that that is not a complete list of those at risk. Any source of burning fuel such as a fireplace, stove, water heaters, and charcoal grills all produce carbon monoxide which means that pretty much every person in the country is exposed to CO to some extent.<sup>ix</sup> Which explains why there are roughly 10000 carbon monoxide related injuries a year.<sup>x</sup> The elderly, young children, and those with heart or lung disease are also much more susceptible to carbon monoxide poisoning.<sup>xi</sup>



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After reading this you may be having a minor freak out wondering what you can do to protect yourself. Well, carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless, and tasteless gas so it cannot be detected without help.<sup>xii</sup> That doesn't mean that there is nothing that you can do. For one, there are carbon

monoxide detectors that you can buy. They work just like smoke detectors, but for carbon monoxide. Also, if you have fuel burning appliances get them inspected every year. The American Society of Home Inspectors can help you find one near you, or you can do a simple Google search. Also, open a window. Fresh air will help vent any CO in your home. There are also a few things that you should avoid. Idling a car in a closed garage, using a gas powered appliance in enclosed spaces, using gas ovens to heat your home, and sleeping in a room with an unvented kerosene heater are all things that should be avoided.<sup>xiii</sup>

There are many things in life to fear, and having completed this few hours of research, I definitely think carbon monoxide is one of them. That doesn't mean that you should throw out every gas appliance you have, open all your windows, and sit in the fetal position in the corner. What it does mean is that you should be aware of the dangers that carbon monoxide poses, and take some simple precautions. After a quick Google search, you can find carbon monoxide detectors for under twenty dollars. It's a cheap one, but it will provide you some level of peace of mind. Others range up over 300 dollars. It's entirely up to you how secure you want to feel. Also, *open a window!* Fresh air never killed anybody, and it's actually good for you believe it or not. You can also invest in an air filter for your home. Other than that, be aware of what produces CO, and use your common sense. Don't turn on your gas powered leaf blower in the house for example. One, you're releasing CO, and two think of the damage you could do to the good China dishes. Ultimately, carbon monoxide is just one of a million dangers that exist in our world. We need to be aware of it, we need to know what to do to prevent it, and what to do if we think we're being affected by it which is go to the Emergency Room, but we shouldn't live our lives terrified of it. The name Silent Killer is terrifying, but it's preventable.

### About the Author



**Dominick Principe** is a graduate of Rowan University with dual Bachelor Degrees in Elementary Education and Writing Arts. He is a prolific reader who devours any book put before him, and feels that life is one great long book without an end. He fills his hours constantly exploring new information, and seeking to educate himself in the ways of the world. He puts all of that knowledge and his passion for learning to good use teaching English as a second language to students of all ages. When his nose isn't buried in a book, or in class teaching, then he can generally be found typing away at his computer working on some random piece of writing that he was inspired to do.

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<sup>i</sup> "Carbon Monoxide The Silent Killer." *Health.ny*. Web. 26 Nov. 2014. <<https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/2826.pdf>>.

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