

GREENWorks

Ideas for a Cleaner Environment

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Power Knocked Out? Generate a Safe Home

A collaborative message from the New Hampshire Carbon Monoxide Workgroup

How long was your power out during the Ice Storm of December 2008, just one year ago? Did you lose power during one of the three 100-year rain events that occurred within the last four years? If you didn't already have a generator, perhaps one of these events convinced you to purchase one for "next time." Generators are a great backup power source. But like all fossil fuel burning sources, if not properly installed, vented and operated, the risk of your family experiencing carbon monoxide poisoning in the home is very real.

Carbon monoxide has been described as a colorless, odorless gas that can result from incomplete burning of fossil fuels in generators, fireplaces, defective furnaces, wood burning stoves and vehicles. Every year in the US, approximately 40,000 people seek medical attention and 2,500 deaths are reported due to carbon monoxide poisoning. In New Hampshire, the leading cause of carbon monoxide poisonings is due to improperly placed or used generators.

The 2008 ice storm damage to New Hampshire communities was severe, causing about 800,000 people to be without power at the height of the storm, and left many residents without power for days. Rather than staying at emergency shelters, many people elected to remain at home, using generators and other backup heating sources. As a result, from December 12 through 31, there were 70 carbon monoxide encounters identified by the Division of Public Health Services — four people died.

This need not happen to you, so here's what you can do.

First, recognize the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning - which can include dizziness, headaches, blurred vision, weakness, vomiting, chest pain, nausea and confusion – and get help immediately! Onset of severe symptoms may be neurological in nature and cause behavioral damage days after exposure.

However, instead of waiting for symptoms to manifest, install carbon monoxide detectors in your home, now! These inexpensive devices are widely available, easy to install and will provide 24/7 detection even during a power outage. A new state law passed this year will require CO detectors to be installed in single and multi-family dwellings built or substantially rehabilitated after January 1, 2010.

Equally important to know is how to properly use your backup generator *before* the lights go out. Portable generators should be placed 10 feet from any structure, with the exhaust facing away

from the building openings. Placing a generator within the home, garage or other structure or too close to the house, can result in deadly exhaust fumes and potentially lead to severe injury or death. The Division of Fire Safety has a practical, informative bulletin on residential generators, which clearly outlines how to safely operate and position your generator to protect your home and your family; it's available at

<http://www.nh.gov/safety/divisions/firesafety/building/electrician/documents/InformationalBulletinResidentialGeneratorSafety7-14-09.pdf>.

In 2008, New Hampshire fire officials report that 30 people lost their lives in fires or carbon monoxide events, which is the highest in more than 30 years. Let's reduce that number to zero. Generate a safe home and ride out the next storm with peace of mind.

(The New Hampshire Carbon Monoxide Work Group includes representatives from NHDES, U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, NH Department of Health and Human Services, NH Department of Safety, NH Office of the State Fire Marshal)