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## Deadly and Deceptive

### Protecting Your Family From Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

By Ron Hazelton



**Dec. 23** —The dangers of carbon monoxide, often called the "silent killer," are even more pronounced in winter, when heaters and idling cars produce the colorless, odorless and poisonous gas.

Just this past Thanksgiving, an elderly Arkansas couple was found dead in their home. When police entered the home, officers found the space heater on high and the temperature at 120 degrees. The level of carbon monoxide gas inside the home was off the charts.

A family of five in Houston barely got out of their home alive last month, hours after a faulty furnace filled their home with the deadly gas.

Carbon monoxide is produced by furnaces, water heaters, cooking ranges and idling cars. It is a colorless and odorless gas that cannot be detected by smell, taste or sight. The gas is not only deadly, but deceptive as well, because carbon monoxide poisoning often masquerades as other illnesses.

Each year, 200 people in the United States die from carbon monoxide poisoning, and several thousand more go to the hospital to be treated for it. Dr. Mike Touger, a specialist in treating carbon monoxide poisoning at New York's Jacobi Medical Center, said that there are specific signs of carbon monoxide poisoning that you can look for.

"Red flags would include multiple members of a household all getting similar symptoms at the same time," Touger said. "Or symptoms which are geographically specific, meaning that you feel sick in your home. When you leave your home and go to work you feel somewhat better until you return home, and then the symptoms recur."

### A Tragic Winter Evening

Cheryl and Todd Burt, along with their three sons, Zachary, Nicholas and Ryan, were a typical American family, spending a normal winter evening indoors at their Kimball, Minn. home on Jan. 5, 1996, a night that would soon become disastrous.

"We were all feeling very sick," Cheryl Burt recalled in a 1998 interview with *Good Morning America*. "But we just attributed it to the flu. And about 10:15, my youngest, Zachary, woke up, and so I went upstairs, you know, rocked him back to sleep. I must have woken up probably eight times between then and 4:30 in the morning. I went into the baby's room, and I was so weak I could not lift him up to rock him. He was making really weird noises, and he was very uncomfortable."

Cheryl Burt called out to her husband, Todd, who was asleep.

"She was yelling, 'Todd, Todd, help me, help me. I'm really sick. I can't make it to the bed,'" he recalled. "And I woke up and went in there, and next thing I know we were both lying on the floor."

The Burts' ordeal would go on for another nine hours, with tragic results.

"I struggled to get up the stairs, basically on my hands on knees," Todd Burt said. "I went into the baby's room first, checked on Zachary, he was in the crib and he was dead. And I went in and found my second son, and he's lying there, and you know, I went to pick him up, and rigor mortis had set in. It was very hard."

## A Frantic 911 Call

Terrified, Todd Burt checked on his third son, Ryan.

"I went to him and I grabbed him, and he just kind of opened his eyes back and went, 'Ouch, dad, ouch.' You know, he was in extreme pain, but he couldn't move," Todd Burt said.

Barely able to stand or speak, Todd Burt managed to call 911.

"I think I have, I got two, two boys in bed, in bed that are dead," Burt said.

"Could it possibly be carbon monoxide poisoning?" the dispatcher asked.

"I don't know, it's....," Burt said.

"We'll get them right out. We'll get the ambulance and rescue right out there," the dispatcher said.

Some nine hours after first drifting into unconsciousness, Cheryl, Todd and their son Ryan received emergency medical treatment. For their sons Zachary, 4, and Nicholas, 1, help came too late. The boys died of excessive levels of carbon monoxide. The family later blamed the gas on a faulty furnace.

"Carbon monoxide is the most common cause of poisoning death in this country, by far, and the bulk of the cases that we treat here, in retrospect, ought to have been preventable," Touger said.

■ **Symptoms of Carbon Monoxide poisoning:** The initial symptoms of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning mimic the flu with no fever. The symptoms include headache, fatigue, shortness of breath, nausea and dizziness, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Many people mistake their symptoms for the flu, or are misdiagnosed by doctors, which sometimes results in tragic deaths.

### ■ **Protecting Your Family:**

1. Do an annual inspection of heating system and gas-burning appliances. A qualified technician should come equipped with a digital CO analyzer such as the Bacharach Monoxor II, which can be used to check the furnace, water heater, range, oven and other gas-burning appliances while they are in operation.
2. Install working Carbon Monoxide alarms. CO detectors have a useful life of around five years. Older units should be replaced. Newer models (meeting the current UL standards) will alarm only when there is a sustained level of 70 ppm (parts per million) of carbon monoxide in the air. Lower CO levels, especially if prolonged, may be harmful to babies, youngsters, pregnant women and older people. Choose an alarm with a digital readout and memory that will record the highest CO level that occurred since the last re-set.
3. **What to do if alarm goes off:** Evacuate the house. Call the fire department. If CO levels are not high, ask that your family be tested with a CO breath analyzer (the CO in the house may have dissipated by the time the fire department arrives).

Other tips:

- a. Avoid warming up automobile in the garage.
- b. Never use charcoal to cook inside.
- c. Do not use generators in garages, basements or indoors.

4. **Backdrafting:** Exhaust gases from furnaces, fireplaces, water heaters and other appliances can be pulled back inside a tightly sealed house when exhaust fans, clothes dryers and other appliances are operated. This can happen when:

- a. The house is tightly sealed (weather-stripping, energy efficient windows).
- b. The furnace and other fuel-burning appliances are old or have been poorly maintained.

- c. Exhaust fans have been added in kitchens and bathrooms.
- d. Wood-burning fireplaces do not have glass doors.
- e. Basements have been remodeled reducing the supply of combustion air to the furnace.