

Carbon monoxide is a silent killer



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Back in my younger days, I was on a late season elk hunt near Eagle, Colorado, in the White River National Forest. We had a snowstorm move through, dropping a foot of the white stuff. After the storm, the skies cleared and the temperature dropped, to somewhere between unbelievable and unbearable.

That night, I attempted sleep in my war surplus tent, left over from the Russian Front. I was so cold that I ran a catalytic heater, lantern and cook stove, all in an attempt to keep from freezing to death.

I don't know the reason why I did not die in my sleep that night, but I suspect it was the amount of "ventilation" in this tent from all the holes and broken zippers on the doors and windows. Perhaps it was too cold for Murphy, because he did not drop in on me that night.

Carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning is known as the silent killer. Carbon monoxide is emitted when a fuel, such as propane is burned. CO is odorless and colorless and very difficult to detect. When inhaled, a person can very quickly suffer from carbon monoxide poisoning.

On average, around 500 people die each year from CO poisoning, with many of them in RVs and campers. Tent campers are also at risk. Annually, 50,000 people visit an emergency room because of CO poisoning.

Rodeo folks recently lost Justin Cunningham, 27, to the deadly gas. He was running a generator in the stock portion of his trailer and the gas leaked into the living quarters while he slept.

A few years back, three football players from the Cedaredge High School football team had an exposure to carbon monoxide while in a camping trailer sleeping. All three were flown to a Denver hospital where one of the boys died.

A 28-year-old hunter from the Front Range died during last year's archery season from accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. He was hunting in the Taylor Park area and camped near Cottonwood Pass, in Gunnison County.

Gunnison County Coroner Frank Vader confirmed through an autopsy that the man died of carbon monoxide poisoning. His report stated that the hunter had two lanterns; one that burned propane, and an older model that used another type of fuel that was manually pumped into a

chamber for burning.

It was speculated that the man used the lanterns for warmth in his tent, as the night before the temperature dropped to 19 degrees. When officials found the man the next morning, he was unresponsive and both lanterns were out of fuel.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission reported that in 2010 about 11 percent of all carbon monoxide deaths occurred inside tents and camping trailers.

Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning can often resemble that of a cold or flu.

These include:

- Dizziness
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Irregular breathing

A person who exhibits any of these symptoms should be treated immediately or death can occur.

The treatment calls for a very quick response. Immediately turn off the appliance and open all the doors, windows, tent flap, depending on what area the victim is enclosed in. The idea is to ventilate the area thoroughly.

If possible, leave the area and seek fresh air. The victim should be transported to an emergency medical facility as soon as possible.

Any time you go camping, especially in the colder months when you spend more time inside, keep these important tips in mind:

Fuel-burning equipment, such as lanterns, grills and heaters should not be used in tents, campers or other enclosed areas. Do your cooking outside, no matter how cold it is.

Opening tent flaps, doors or windows does not allow adequate ventilation of carbon monoxide. Even my war surplus tent did not have enough ventilation, moth and bullet holes notwithstanding.

Stay away from heaters. Use proper bedding and clothing to provide warmth. An electric heater is a good alternative, if you have the hook ups.

If you use a generator, be certain to run it far away from your enclosed areas. The generator should be a minimum of 20 feet away from any doors or windows.

Carbon monoxide poisoning risk increase with altitude. There is less oxygen the higher up we go.

Anyone with a camper or RV with built in heating and cooking appliances should follow these additional tips:

- Make sure you have a working carbon monoxide alarm and change the batteries each year. I suggest lithium batteries because they will not leak and will work in the colder temperatures, unlike alkaline batteries.
- Have your heating and cooking systems thoroughly inspected prior to camping season and after traveling long distances.



This inexpensive little heater can warm up your tent in a hurry, but it can also kill you. Be aware of carbon monoxide, the silent killer. (Submitted photo/ Mark Rackay)

Fuel lines and fittings can sometimes work loose. We carried a jar of soapy water with us to check all the joints for leaks.

- Adjust all pilot lights, ovens, stoves, lamps and heaters upon arrival at your camping destination, and anytime you move. A yellow flame indicates improper adjustment and the potential for excessive carbon monoxide.

- Never use a camper oven as a source of heat because most camper ovens have no exterior vent.

- Remember that liquefied

petroleum is heavier than air. A leak in the system will cause the gas to settle near the floor, where any open flame or spark can cause a flash fire. If you smell propane, open doors and windows, and get out.

- Be sure you have adequate cross ventilation in the camper. You should never rely on roof vents alone, because there is no cross ventilation.

A little common sense will go a long way if you camp during the cold months. Never rely on luck. I was very fortunate that

it was too cold for Murphy that night in the White River. Maybe he just did not want to be seen in a war surplus tent, leftover from the Russian Front.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

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