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A Silent Killer

By: Patrick Breen

As a home inspector in the Black Hills I routinely review residential properties for fire safety. This includes, but is not limited to, inspecting a variety of fuel-burning appliances for proper venting and functionality; as well as those hazards related to having an attached garage. Inspections also include verifying the required installation, proper placement and working condition of smoke alarms.

This is done to help educate property owners on the care, maintenance and safety of their home and its occupants. Unfortunately, there is one safety device I rarely find installed because it is not required by the state of South Dakota, or our local municipalities, but something I highly recommend and believe is so important; a carbon monoxide detector.

According to the "Journal of the American Medical Association," there are 1,500 deaths and 10,000 poisonings each year in the United States from carbon monoxide (CO). Many of these accidents could have been avoided with the simple installation of a CO detector.

Carbon monoxide is a gas produced from burning fuels such as gasoline, propane, natural gas, oil, wood or coal. It is odorless, colorless and extremely deadly when it is allowed to build up inside enclosed, unvented areas such as a garage or home.

The most common causes for CO build up inside your home are: a furnace, gas stove or water heater that is faulty or has been installed improperly; the outside vent from these fuel burning appliance becoming blocked by snow or ice; a car or gas powered device left running inside a closed garage, and/or a charcoal grill being used inside.

Often CO build-up happens quickly and the effects go unnoticed because the home occupants are asleep. Sometimes a slow leak may go on for weeks or months with the symptoms being attributed to other ailments. Symptoms vary between individuals but typically include flu-like maladies such as headaches, vomiting, dizziness, fatigue, weakness, confusion, ringing ears and, in extreme exposures, unconsciousness followed by death. There have also been instances where individuals have had no symptoms before losing consciousness.

It is for these reasons that I highly recommend all homeowners install CO detectors. If the detector you choose is electronic make sure it also has a battery back-up to ensure it will continue to work during power outages. Because detectors lose their sensitivity to CO gas over time I recommend that you replace your detector every five years.

You should place one CO detector on each floor, within close proximity to bedrooms so the alarm will wake you. Do not install them directly above burning device such as your furnace or gas water heater, but close by. Remember, CO gas rises. If you have an attached garage make sure there is a detector located in any living space above the garage as well.

Finally, if your CO alarm does go off call 911 immediately. Next, open windows and doors, then leave the building quickly before you lose consciousness.