

## Winter Life-threatening Risks: Open Fires and Carbon Monoxide

In the month of December 2007 the Presidio of Monterey Fire Department responded to a fire in the housing area in the early hours one weekend. The fire was started in an above ground fire pit that many people have on the patios of their homes both on and off the installation. These portable fire pits are usually pedestals with a screened in area to contain the fire and any sparks or embers. These commercially available items can be purchased at a variety of home improvement centers and hardware stores; when used properly they are fairly safe.

One member of the POM/OMC community attempted to light a fire in one these portable fire pits using a flammable liquid. The liquid flashed and caught the container on fire. The stream of burning gasoline fell upon this person's leg causing 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns on their lower extremities. Luckily a Police Department vehicle had been patrolling the area at that same time, witnessed the fire and called the POMFD to respond immediately. In addition to the burns on the member's legs the garage suffered fire damage with the potential of involving the entire house.

This was an extremely unfortunate event that could have ended in tragedy. However, this accident was completely 100% preventable. Using sound judgment and basic risk management techniques is the most effective way to avoid injury and loss. The POMFD would like to provide the following tips for safe use of above ground fire pits:

- Keep the fire 25ft away from the building
- Keep all combustibles at least 5 feet away from the fire
- Start a small fire with kindling and build a larger fire around it
- Use wood that is dry and store wood so that it is not exposed to moisture
- Use fireplace matches or B-B-Q lighter to ignite kindling
- Never use flammable liquids to enhance the fire
- When adding additional logs to the fire secure all loose clothing, wear oven mitts or similar item to protect hands from heat
- Let fire burn completely out, then wet and stir the coals. Ensure the ashes are totally cool and dispose of properly

Hundreds of people die from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning each year and it remains a serious threat no matter the season, but activities that typically increase with the onset of winter weather conditions pose an even greater risk. Recent tragic events throughout the country have served as sad reminders that carbon monoxide poisoning can result in death when it reaches unsafe levels. Presidio of Monterey Fire Department urges the public to be aware of the dangers of carbon monoxide and to take measures to ensure safe practices.

Since the advent of winter weather the POMFD has responded to quite a few emergencies related to CO. We would like to take this opportunity to remind everyone of what to do if their CO detector is sounding an alarm.

- Exit the structure immediately. Do not attempt to reset the alarm on the detector.
- Phone the Fire Department using 9-1-1 and be prepared to answer any questions the dispatcher may have.
- Do not reenter the building for any reason until the area is cleared by FD personnel.

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas that enters the body undetected as a person breathes. The gas is produced by burning wood, coal, charcoal, natural gas, gasoline, propane, oil, methane, and other common fuels. It is also produced by automobiles and other gasoline or diesel engines.

When power outages occur, people naturally look for other ways to see and keep warm. As they look for alternatives for electricity and home heating, they should be aware that the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning can be confused with flu symptoms, food poisoning and other illnesses. Some symptoms include shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, light headedness or headaches.

POMFD suggests the following safety tips to avoid the dangers of carbon monoxide.

- Install carbon monoxide (CO) alarms inside your home to provide early warning of accumulating CO. CO alarms should be installed in a central location outside each separate sleeping area. If bedrooms are spaced apart, each area will need a CO alarm.
- Test CO alarms at least once a month and replace alarms according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- CO alarms are not substitutes for smoke alarms. Know the difference between the sound of smoke alarms and CO alarms.

- Have fuel-burning heating equipment (fireplaces, furnaces, water heaters, wood and coal stoves, space or portable heaters) and chimneys inspected by a professional every year before cold weather sets in.
- When using a fireplace, open the flue for adequate ventilation.
- Never use your oven or grill to heat your home.
- When buying an existing home, have a qualified technician evaluate the integrity of the heating and cooking systems, as well as the sealed spaces between the garage and house.
- If you need to warm a vehicle, remove it from the garage immediately after starting it. Do not run a vehicle, generator, or other fueled engine or motor indoors, even if garage doors are open.