

NEWS RELEASE

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Dangers in Home Heating

Every year homeowners purchase unvented fireplaces or stoves to heat their homes and every year the Regional Air Pollution Control Agency (RAPCA) and the Combined Health District of Montgomery County receive complaints from residents about indoor pollution buildup when using a ventless combustion appliance. The Health District would like to caution homeowners to follow safety guidelines and manufacturer's instructions when using these ventless heating systems.

These combustion devices are used for both warmth and decorative purposes. Fuels are gas, both natural and liquefied petroleum (LP), and kerosene. Unvented appliances do not vent to the outside, so they release combustion pollutants directly into the home. They are usually safe, however under certain conditions, may release combustion pollutants that can affect your health, and even lead to death.

POSSIBLE HEALTH EFFECTS range from headaches, dizziness, sleepiness, and watery eyes to breathing difficulties or even death. Infants, young children and the elderly are a group shown to be more susceptible to pollutants. People with chronic respiratory or cardiovascular illness or immune system diseases are also more susceptible. The health effects can occur immediately after exposure or over a long time. The effects depend on the type and amount of pollutants and the length of time exposed to them. They also depend on several factors related to the exposed person. These include the age and any existing health problems.

If you are using an unvented combustion device and feel you are suffering health effects, Montgomery County Health Commissioner Bill Bines suggests you examine the following questions:

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- Do your symptoms occur only in the home? Do they disappear or decrease when you leave home, and reappear when you return?
- Is anyone else in your household complaining of similar symptoms, such as headaches, dizziness, or sleepiness? Are they complaining of nausea, watery eyes, coughing, or nose and throat irritation?
- Do you always have symptoms?
- Are your symptoms getting worse?
- Do you often catch colds or get the flu?
- Has anyone inspected your unvented units lately? Are you certain they are working properly?

What can you do to minimize exposure to indoor pollution from these products? Proper selection, installation, inspection and maintenance of your appliances are extremely important in reducing your exposure to these pollutants. Providing good ventilation in your home and correctly using your appliance can also reduce your exposure to these pollutants.

Additionally, there are several different residential carbon monoxide detectors for sale. These detectors warn consumers of harmful carbon monoxide levels in the home. Every home with combustion appliances, but especially those with unvented heaters, should have one.

The Health District recommends following these guidelines:

- Choose vented appliances whenever possible.
- Only buy an unvented appliance that has been tested and certified to meet current safety standards by a certifying organization such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL).
- Check your local and state building codes and fire ordinances to see if you can use an unvented space heater, if you consider purchasing one. They are not allowed to be used in some communities, dwellings, or certain rooms in the house.
- If you must replace an unvented unit with another, make it a new one. Heaters made after 1982 have a pilot light safety system called an oxygen depletion sensor (ODS). This system shuts off the heater when there is not enough fresh air, before the heater begins producing large amounts of carbon monoxide. Look for the label that tells you that the appliance has this safety system. Older heaters will not have this protection system

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- Buy appliances the correct size for the area you want to heat. Using the wrong size heater may produce more pollutants in your home and is not an efficient use of energy.
- Talk to a dealer to determine the type and size of appliance you need. You may wish to write to the appliance manufacturer or association for more information on the appliance.
- Keep doors open to the rest of the house from the room where you are using an unvented gas space heater or kerosene heater, and crack open a window. This allows enough air for proper combustion and reduces the level of pollutants, especially carbon monoxide.
- Read and follow the instructions for all appliances so you understand how they work. Keep the owner's manual in a convenient place to refer to when needed. Also, read and follow the warning labels because they tell you important safety information that you need to know. Reading and following the instructions and warning labels will minimize your exposure to combustion pollutants.
- Always use the correct fuel for the appliance. Only use water-clear ASTM 1-K kerosene for kerosene heaters. The use of kerosene other than 1-K could lead to a release of more pollutants in your home. Never use gasoline in a kerosene heater because it can cause a fire or an explosion. Using even small amounts of gasoline could cause a fire.
- Never use an unvented combustion heater overnight or in a room where you are sleeping. Carbon monoxide from combustion heaters can reach dangerous levels.
- Never ignore the smell of fuel. This usually indicates that the appliance is not operating properly or is leaking fuel. Leaking fuel will not always be detectible by smell. If you suspect a fuel leak have it fixed as soon as possible. In most cases you should shut off the appliance, extinguish any other flames or pilot lights, shut off other appliances in the area, open windows and doors, call for help, and leave the area.
- Have your combustion appliance regularly inspected and maintained. Appliances that are not working properly can release harmful and even fatal amounts of pollutants, especially carbon monoxide.

Should you have additional questions on the safe use of or health effects from unvented combustion appliances, call the Regional Air Pollution Agency at 937.225.4435.

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