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Raleigh – From the N.C. Office of State Fire Marshal

CO Alarms: The End of Life Warning

How do you know when you should replace a carbon monoxide alarm? That's a common question fielded by the North Carolina Department of Insurance Office of State Fire Marshal, and a topic that's of importance to homeowners, firefighters and code officials.

Beginning in March 2007, UL 2034, the standard for single and multi-station carbon monoxide (CO) alarms required that all CO alarms have an audible "end of life" warning. The end of life warning alerts you that the unit has reached its expiration and should be replaced. Some manufacturers have voluntarily included this warning on their products since 2001; pursuant to UL 2034, any CO alarm manufactured after April 2007 with a UL listing must include an end of life warning.

Additionally, UL 2075 aligned with UL 2034 in September 2009 in requiring end of life warnings for gas and vapor detectors and sensors covered under the standard.

It is important for people to be able to recognize and understand the different alert sounds generated by smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms; different manufacturers use a variety of alarm sequences to indicate the end of the carbon monoxide alarm's life.

For example, a Kidde-brand carbon monoxide alarm will begin "chirping" every 30 seconds when it is reaching its operational end of life. When in this mode, the alarm will not be able to detect carbon monoxide, and the chirping will only stop if power is cut off from the unit. During the end of life warning, Kidde CO alarms with a digital display will read "ERR," and when the Peak Level Memory Button is pressed, the display will show "E," "O" and "9." The user will know that this is the end of life warning, and not a low battery warning, because the chirp will return if the batteries are replaced.

If you are ever unsure about the expiration date of the carbon monoxide alarms, it is best to replace it with an alarm that meets the newest standards.

About Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide, or CO, is deadly gas that is invisible, odorless and colorless. It is created during the combustion process when fuels, such as gasoline, wood, coal, natural gas and oil, burn incompletely. Potential sources of carbon monoxide around the home include heating and cooking equipment, and vehicles or generators running in attached garages.

A person can be poisoned by a small concentration of CO over a longer time period, or by a larger concentration in a shorter period; the dangers depend on a number of variables, including the person's health and activity level. Symptoms of CO exposure can be similar to those of the flu, food poisoning or other illnesses.

If your carbon monoxide alarm sounds and you believe anyone in the household is experiencing carbon monoxide poisoning, everyone should move into fresh air and then call 911. If the alarm sounds and no one is experiencing symptoms, move into fresh air and call the fire department or a qualified technician to have the problem inspected. If you are unable to leave the home, call for help, open doors and windows, and turn off all possible sources while you wait for assistance to arrive. Never ignore an alarm!

Safety Tips

- CO alarms should be installed in a central location outside each sleeping area, on every level of the home and in other locations where required by applicable laws, codes or standards. For best protection, interconnect all CO alarms throughout the home, so that when one sounds, they all sound.
- Follow the manufacturer's instructions for placement and mounting height.
- Choose a CO alarm that has the label of a recognized testing laboratory.
- Test CO alarms at least once a month; replace them according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- If the audible trouble signal sounds, check for low batteries. If the battery is low, replace it. If the alarm still sounds, call the fire department.
- If you need to warm a vehicle, remove it from the garage immediately after starting it. Do not run a vehicle or other fueled engine or motor indoors, even if the garage doors are open. Make sure the exhaust pipe of a running vehicle is not covered with snow.
- During and after a snowstorm, make sure vents for the dryer, furnace, stove and fireplace are clear of snow build-up.
- A generator should be used in a well-ventilated location outdoors away from windows, doors and vent openings.
- Gas or charcoal grills can produce CO; only use them outside.

