

The New Jersey Poison Control Center — Serving New Jersey Since 1983

HEALTH ADVISORY

Carbon Monoxide Sickens NJ Family of Four

State Poison Control Center Warns of Unsafe Use of Portable Gas Generators

The New Jersey Poison Control Center in January assisted in the medical care of a family exposed to dangerous carbon monoxide (CO) from the exhaust fumes of a portable gas generator running in the basement.

The adults and their children experienced symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning and required treatment in the emergency room.

“Fortunately, this family’s exposure to carbon monoxide didn’t end in tragedy,” said Bruce Ruck, managing director of the New Jersey Poison Control Center at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. “Carbon monoxide poisoning is a hidden hazard that worries us at the poison control center year-round, especially during cold weather and storms that cause power outages, flooding and snow accumulation. People and pets are often accidentally exposed to CO when gas-powered equipment, including portable generators, are used indoors or too close to homes and buildings.”

Carbon monoxide is a poisonous gas that causes mild to severe illness to hundreds of people in New Jersey each year. Breathing in carbon monoxide, often referred to as “the silent killer,” can quickly become life-threatening and must be treated as a medical emergency. There is no safe level of carbon monoxide for anyone, including pets.

It is crucial to recognize the signs and symptoms of CO poisoning and act quickly, poison control experts said. Early symptoms of CO poisoning can be mistaken for symptoms of the common cold, flu, or COVID-19. If symptoms improve while outside, consider carbon monoxide poisoning as a possibility, they added.

Symptoms can include headache, dizziness, weakness, upset stomach, vomiting, chest pain and confusion. At high levels, CO poisoning causes unconsciousness (coma) and death.

To prevent unintentional carbon monoxide poisoning, keep running gas generators outdoors only. Because gas-powered equipment produces carbon monoxide, they should never be used indoors, no matter the circumstance, experts said.

Generators should be placed outside more than 20 feet away with exhausts directed away from your home and your neighbors' homes. This will prevent dangerous levels of CO from building up inside and poisoning those exposed to it. Gas generators are safe when used according to the manufacturer's instructions and kept at the recommended distance from homes and buildings. (Consumer Reports details crucial [safety tips](#) on operating a generator.)

"This gas gives no warning, meaning you can't see, smell, hear or taste it," Ruck said.

The only way to know if CO is inside your home is to have working carbon monoxide detectors on every floor and outside sleeping areas.

"If a carbon monoxide detector sounds its alarm, do not ignore it because it's trying to save your life," Ruck said.

Carbon monoxide detectors don't malfunction as often as people may think. Check CO detector units and batteries twice a year when changing the clocks for Daylight Savings Time.

"CO detectors save lives, so be sure to have them in your home or apartment," said Ruck.

If you suspect someone is experiencing symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, get medical help immediately:

1. If someone is unconscious or unresponsive, get them out of the house and call 911 immediately.
2. Leave the house or building and get to fresh air. Don't waste time opening windows. This will delay your escape and cause you to breathe in even more dangerous fumes.
3. Contact your local fire department or energy provider to check for a carbon monoxide leak.
4. Call the New Jersey Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222 for personalized medical guidance and care.

If you have questions or concerns about carbon monoxide, contact the New Jersey Poison Control Center immediately for medical treatment advice. Anyone can call for medical help – children, teens and adults.

Poison control centers are a medical resource for the public and health care providers. Get help 24/7: Call the Poison Help line at 1-800-222-1222 or [start an online chat](#). If someone isn't breathing, is having difficulty waking up or having a seizure, call 911.

Available for Media Interviews

Diane Calello, MD, Executive and Medical Director, New Jersey Poison Control Center, Rutgers NJ Medical School's Department of Emergency Medicine

Bruce Ruck, Pharm.D., Managing Director, New Jersey Poison Control Center, Rutgers NJ Medical School's Department of Emergency Medicine

About New Jersey Poison Control Center/NJPIES, 1-800-222-1222

Chartered in 1983, the New Jersey Poison Information & Education System (NJPIES), known to the public as the New Jersey Poison Control Center, is the state's primary defense against injury and deaths from intentional and unintentional poisonings. It is designated as the state's regional poison control center by the New Jersey Department of Health and the American Association of Poison Control Centers. It is a division of the Department of Emergency Medicine at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. NJPIES has a state-of-the-art center located at Rutgers Health in Newark. NJPIES is funded, in part, by the NJ Department of Health, NJ Hospitals and the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

Hotline staff (physicians, registered nurses, and pharmacists) provide free telemedicine consultation through hotline services (telephone, text, chat) regarding poison emergencies and provide information on poison prevention practices, drug interactions and overdoses, food poisoning, environmental chemical exposures, animal/insect bites and stings, plant and other outdoor exposures, carbon monoxide and lead poisonings, and more. NJPIES' services are free, confidential/private, available 24/7, and help is available in any language. Call 1-800-222-1222 or [Chat Here](#).

About Rutgers New Jersey Medical School

Founded in 1954, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School is the oldest school of medicine in the state. Today it is part of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and graduates approximately 170 physicians a year. In addition to providing the MD degree, the school offers MD/PhD, MD/MPH, and MD/MBA degrees through collaborations with other institutions of higher education. Dedicated to excellence in education, research, clinical care and community outreach, the medical school comprises 20 academic departments and works with several healthcare partners, including its principal teaching hospital, University Hospital. Its faculty consists of numerous world-renowned scientists and many of the region's "top doctors." Home to the nation's oldest student-run clinic, New Jersey Medical School hosts more than 50 centers and institutes, including the Public Health Research Institute Center, the Global Tuberculosis Institute and the Neurological Institute of New Jersey. For more information, please visit njms.rutgers.edu.

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