

Carbon Monoxide Awareness Week

November 1-7, 2021

The following story is the Kirby family's experience with a carbon monoxide (CO) leak in their home. They have shared their story with the hopes that everyone in Ontario understands the importance of having a working carbon monoxide alarm installed in your home. It's the law.

"In April of this year, our combination smoke and CO alarm began to sound around noon. My husband dutifully went upstairs and changed the batteries in our alarm. I remember it was a beautiful clear and sunny Sunday afternoon but the doors and windows were not open as it was still quite cool outside. In our home we have two smoke alarms and one digital CO alarm.

Two hours later, the alarm went off again. At this point my husband had thought that perhaps the batteries he had installed may be faulty and he again replaced the batteries.

At 4:00 pm the alarm went off again. We were puzzled as to why this was happening. We were not cooking and there was no smoke in the house to make us think there was a reason to be concerned. We knew that there was nothing in the house that would trigger a smoke alarm. We discussed getting a new alarm the next day.

We never considered it could be carbon monoxide.

At 7:00 pm the alarm went off again. At this point I was starting to get concerned but still never suspected carbon monoxide. Finally, I decided to give the local fire department a call to see what they had to suggest. I did not call 911 but I called the inquiries line.

When I explained to the dispatcher that this wasn't an emergency, that I just wanted someone's thoughts as to why the smoke alarm kept going off. The dispatcher said they were sending out the fire truck immediately. I insisted it was not an emergency but she did not ask any further questions. I could tell the dispatcher took this very seriously.

Within 10 minutes, a fire truck arrived and two young men came in wearing complete gear. When they walked in the door they had a handheld CO detector. They informed us that they had a CO reading of 14 ppm just at our front door.

They then proceeded going through the house and taking readings in every room and noted that in some of the rooms the readings were quite high.

My husband and I have lived in our home for the past 20 years and had a new propane furnace installed in our house 3 years ago. They went under our house into our crawl space where our furnace is located and confirmed the CO reading was very high. Immediately, they shut off the furnace and opened all the doors and windows. We were shocked to learn that we had a carbon monoxide leak.

"We could have gone to sleep that night and not woken up in the morning."

— Kathy and Brian Kirby

The fire fighters then checked our smoke alarms and told us that one of them had passed its best before date. I did not know that the detectors had a limited life.

We had been pretty casual about our smoke alarms. We just changed the batteries in the fall and forgot about them. We did not realize that the smoke alarm that kept going off was also a combination CO alarm. Our digital CO alarm numbers were high but since we were not sure what they should have read and it did not sound any alarm, we didn't think anything of it.

While this was going on I never considered carbon monoxide poisoning. I kept thinking the alarm was asking for new batteries. It is shocking to me that I was so unaware of what could be happening. There was nothing to suggest that carbon monoxide was leaking into our home. We had no symptoms, did not smell anything, and without an alarm there would have been no indication of trouble.

The next day our propane company sent someone to the house to examine the furnace and it was discovered the leak was the result of a crack in the heat exchanger. Due to a lack of supplies because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it took almost 10 days to get the correct part for the furnace.

This incident was a real wake up call for us. I have heard of people dying of carbon monoxide poisoning but I always thought it happened in houses that had natural gas or that perhaps they left a stove turned on or that their equipment was not well maintained. I now know that that is absolutely not correct. It can happen at anytime to anyone.

When the alarm went off, we never even considered that perhaps we had a deadly gas leaking into the house. We didn't know why it was going off and even thought the alarm was faulty.

I know about smoke alarms but I never really considered what carbon monoxide alarms are. I kept thinking that the warning had something to do with smoke when it was actually warning about carbon monoxide.

I have told this story to all my family and friends and share it with everyone now in the hopes that everyone in Ontario becomes more aware of how serious, deadly, and silent carbon monoxide is."

— Kathy and Brian Kirby
Bobcaygeon, Ontario October 22, 2021

