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8 treated for carbon monoxide

2 pregnant women among those aided; heating units blamed
Melissa Klein

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VALHALLA - When carbon monoxide seeped into the Todd home in Bedford over the course of perhaps a week, the detector did not go off to alert the family. That is because it was sitting, unused, in a kitchen drawer.

"One of the most ridiculous things I could have ever done," said Leigh Todd as she recovered yesterday at Westchester Medical Center from carbon monoxide exposure.

Had the family's malfunctioning oil burner, which sent the potentially deadly carbon monoxide fumes into the house, also not emitted a strong odor that woke Todd early yesterday morning, the family might not have survived.

Todd, who is pregnant with twins, was treated yesterday at the medical center's hyperbaric chamber, her body flushed of the poison as she breathed 100 percent oxygen. Todd's two children, ages 7 and 2, were at the hospital for observation, but did not require hyperbaric treatment, nor did her husband.

The hospital's three chambers have been busy this week, as eight people were treated for carbon monoxide exposure in four days, including two pregnant women. The hospital normally gets one such case a month.

The extreme cold temperatures of the past week have had furnaces going nonstop, increasing the chances for the byproducts of combustion such as carbon monoxide to come back into a house if there is a malfunction in the heating system, said Tony Sutton, Westchester County's commissioner of emergency services.

Dawn Salka, the nurse manager in the hyperbaric unit, said one of the pregnant women was at work in New Canaan, Conn., where carbon monoxide, an odorless gas, was seeping into her office from a bakery next door with a malfunctioning flue. Her major complaint was a headache, which is one symptom of carbon monoxide poisoning.

"You don't feel well. You have a headache," S! alka said. "As your level gets higher you become nauseous. You start v omiting. You become unconscious." Todd said she was having headaches over the course of a week and almost passed out last weekend.

Carbon monoxide is so deadly because it binds to the hemoglobin in blood 250 times faster than oxygen, said Ron Brown, safety director of the hyperbaric unit, which is run by a company called Life Support Technologies. "It suffocates you," Brown said.

Ridding the body of the poison involves three two-hour treatments in the hyperbaric chamber, in which the air is at a pressure greater than sea level. Patients can lie down and watch television.

"I watched a movie," Todd said. "It's not exactly the most comfortable thing, but considering the alternative and where I'd be, it's not anything I'd complain about right now."

Reach Melissa Klein at mklein@thejournalnews.com or 914-694-5063.
Preventing carbon monoxide exposure

- Have your heating system, water heater and any other gas-, oil- or ! coal-burning appliances serviced by a qualified technician every year.
- Install a battery-operated CO detector in your home and check or replace the battery when you change the time on your clocks each spring and fall.
- Seek prompt medical attention if you suspect CO poisoning and are feeling dizzy, light-headed or nauseous.
- Don't use a generator, charcoal grill, camp stove or other gasoline- or charcoal-burning device inside your home, basement or garage or near a window.
- Don't run a car or truck inside a garage attached to your house, even if you leave the door open.
- Don't burn anything in a stove or fireplace that isn't vented.
- Don't heat your house with a gas oven.

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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