It’s getting cold in the Rocky Mountain and Plains region, and the arrival of winter means people are firing up their gas furnaces and wood-burning stoves to warm homes. When people use their furnaces and stoves and spend more time indoors, they are at increased risk of exposure to carbon monoxide.

Carbon monoxide is an odorless, invisible gas produced when gasoline, natural gas, propane, kerosene and other fuels are not completely burned during use. The gas is one of the leading causes of poisoning death, with more than 400 victims in the United States each year.

In addition, more than 4,000 Americans are hospitalized for carbon monoxide poisoning and 20,000 people get sick enough from exposure to visit an emergency room each year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Any combustion appliance—gas furnaces, wood stoves, hot water heaters, gas ranges—produces carbon monoxide. A car running in an attached garage or the use of a hibachi indoors can also contribute to a build-up of carbon monoxide in a home.

Since carbon monoxide is odorless and colorless, an exposed person may not be aware they are being poisoned until it is too late. Unborn babies, infants and persons with heart disease are particularly at risk. Early symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning can be similar to flu symptoms, including headaches, nausea, dizziness and fatigue.

If one experiences symptoms they think could be from carbon monoxide poisoning, get fresh air immediately. Open doors and windows, turn off combustion appliances, and leave the house. Go to an emergency room and tell the physician of suspected carbon monoxide poisoning. If carbon monoxide poisoning has occurred, it often can be diagnosed by a blood test done soon after exposure.

Steps one can take to protect themself and his or her family from carbon monoxide poisoning include:

—Make sure appliances are installed and vented properly.

—Have gas or wood-burning appliances, heating and ventilation systems (including chimneys) inspected regularly.

—Inspect homes after heavy snow fall and make sure snow is removed from around exhaust stacks, vents and fresh-air intakes.

—Buy a carbon monoxide detector for the home or apartment and make sure the detector meets Standard UL 2034 of the Underwriters Laboratory. Keep in mind that installing a detector is not a guarantee of safety, it is just one of the precautions one should take.

Things one should NOT do:

—Use a gas range or oven for heating the home.

—Leave a car running in a closed garage.

—Burn charcoal indoors.

—Operate unvented fuel-burning appliances (including electric generators) indoors.

For more information on carbon monoxide and other indoor air quality pollutants, visit EPA's agency website at: www.epa.gov/iaq .

Holyoke Enterprise January 31, 2013