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ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING: Keeping Safe and Warm for the Holidays

Arkansas’s rare white Christmas of 2012 was the first time snow started to fall on Christmas Day to accumulate more than a trace before midnight since 1926, according to the National Weather Service Little Rock Office. The weather, combined with the accompanying power outage, might have created the ambience of Christmases past—very past. But an old-fashioned Christmas isn’t all it’s cracked up to be for people who depend on electricity for almost everything.

Many who struggled through that white but dark and cold Christmas now have gasoline-powered generators on standby. To those people, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency gives this important reminder: Generator exhaust contains carbon monoxide, a deadly gas that can build up quickly and linger for hours. While in operation, they should never be used inside homes, garages, crawlspace or sheds but should be placed outside, well away from doors, windows and vents.
People with fireplaces or wood stoves can endure winter power outages without a generator, but Mike Bates, Air Division chief at the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality, warns that the fine particles in wood smoke can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate other lung diseases, and cause health problems for pregnant women, newborns and people with certain health conditions, such as obesity or diabetes.

Wood stoves and fireplaces can also produce carbon monoxide, as well as other air pollutants. You should use only dry, properly aged wood for fuel and be sure to open flues. Never burn plastics, foam, colored ink, painted or pressure-treated wood, plywood, particle board, or wood that is wet, rotted, diseased or moldy; they all release harmful substances when burned. Read more about safe wood-burning at [http://www.epa.gov/burnwise/bestburn.html](http://www.epa.gov/burnwise/bestburn.html).

Even ocean driftwood, which would seem to be a harmless, natural fuel, emits toxic air pollutants when burned. It creates a beautiful fire with blue and lavender flames while releasing dioxin from the combustion of salt-soaked wood. More information is at the website [About.com](http://www.about.com).

Heaters that burn kerosene, natural gas or liquefied petroleum are usually safe, but they must have adequate ventilation and burn fuel efficiently to prevent carbon monoxide emissions. EPA gives these tips for keeping combustion equipment operating safely:

- Keep all gas appliances properly adjusted.
- Consider purchasing a vented space heater when replacing an unvented one.
- Use proper fuel in kerosene space heaters.
- Install and use an exhaust fan vented to outdoors over gas stoves.
- Open flues when fireplaces are in use.
Choose properly sized wood stoves that are certified to meet EPA emission standards and make sure that doors on all wood stoves fit tightly.

Have a trained professional inspect, clean and tune-up your central heating system (furnaces, flues, chimneys) annually. Repair any leaks promptly.

Do not idle the car inside the garage.

Low concentrations of carbon monoxide can cause fatigue in healthy people and chest pain in people with heart disease. Higher concentrations can cause symptoms that mimic the flu. Exposure can be fatal at very high concentrations. If carbon monoxide poisoning is suspected, leave the house and get medical attention. A blood test soon after exposure can verify carbon monoxide exposure.

All homes with gas or wood-burning appliances should have carbon monoxide detectors and smoke detectors to help make all winter days safely warm and to ensure that roasting chestnuts on an open fire is not a hazardous activity.